

Caltrans moving ahead with first Niles Canyon Road project

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FREMONT -- Despite a week of protests along Niles Canyon Road, Caltrans officials told a sharp-tongued crowd of nearly 100 Fremont and Sunol residents on Wednesday that they are proceeding with plans to widen the state highway.

"The purpose of this project is safety," Caltrans District Director Bijan Sartipi told the overflow crowd at the Fremont Senior Center.

Sartipi also said that a Fremont effort to ban trucks on the road wouldn't have a major safety impact because 80 percent of the truck-related accidents are caused by pickups, which can't be banned.

Opponents fear that Caltrans' proposals, which involve removing about 500 trees and building about two miles of retaining walls along the state designated scenic route would ruin the canyon's beauty and encourage motorists to drive faster, negating safety benefits.

"It's a beautiful scenic highway," Fremont resident Michael McNevin said. "You do this to it and it's going to be a speedway. It's going to be a commuter hell."

However, Caltrans is reconsidering a second, much more extensive road-widening project on Niles Canyon Road, which also has drawn concern from Fremont, Sunol and regulatory agencies.

The transportation agency has delayed the release of its final plans for that project until fall, putting it about six months behind schedule.

Caltrans has proposed three projects totaling about \$76 million for Niles Canyon Road, citing above-average numbers of fatal collisions.

The first two Caltrans projects involve widening much of the road, also called State Route 84. Tree removal and retaining wall construction would be necessary to widen road shoulders, add a center median and soften sharp curves. The third project, scheduled to begin in 2013, would replace Alameda Creek Bridge.

Project opponents protested last week as Caltrans cut down at least 81 trees along the road to prepare for the first widening project, slated to start in spring, and reiterated their concerns Wednesday.

"I've seen a lot of places in the world; Niles Canyon is as pretty as any of them," said Dan Reesor, of Sunol, pointing to the Caltrans officials. "These guys don't have the right to ruin it."

State Sen. Ellen Corbett and Assemblyman Bob Wieckowski requested Wednesday's meeting after last week's protests.