

Fremont leaders disturbed by Niles Canyon tree removal

by Wes Bowers
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In the wake of a large community meeting at Fremont Teen Center earlier this month where dozens of residents protested a highway widening project, City of Fremont will send a letter to Sacramento objecting to the "extreme removal of trees and plants" in Niles Canyon.

Some residents and city officials say the California Department of Transportation is destroying the aesthetics and habitat in Niles Canyon through its state Route 84 widening project.

"What they're doing now is just the beginning, and what they have planned for that area will just annihilate the Niles Canyon," Mayor Bob Wasserman said Tuesday. "We can't just sit back and let that happen."

The council voted 4-0 to send the letter, not only to Gov. Jerry Brown, but to Lt. Gov. Gavin Newsom, the City of Union City and the County of Alameda.

Caltrans' project involves widening Highway 84 in three stages with an estimated \$80 million price tag. The first two phases involve widening the majority of Niles Canyon Road between Fremont Boulevard and Interstate 680 to provide 12-foot lanes, a 2-foot median, and 2-foot to 8-foot shoulders.

The first phase started earlier this year, and the second is scheduled to start in fall 2012. The third project is expected to get underway in summer 2013, and will replace the Alameda Creek Bridge.

Residents and community groups alike have been protesting Caltrans' project, specifically its decision to remove more than 100 mature native trees in Niles Canyon.

The agency claims the project will improve highway and bicycle safety, but opponents don't think the project will do that. Opponents claim state safety statistics show Niles Canyon does not have a relatively high accident rate and is actually below the state average. They believe the project may actually increase traffic fatalities by allowing cars to travel at higher speeds through the canyon with the perception of a wider corridor. Caltrans earlier said it will not increase speed limits.

Mike Dubinsky, a member of Save Niles Canyon, said the group supports the city's letter.

"As a matter of fact we'd support even stronger language asking Caltrans to simply close this project out," he said.

Dubinsky also noted the April 14 meeting, where nearly 200 Sunol and Niles residents came to the teen center to oppose the project.

He said Contra Costa County has a state Route 4 bypass project that could be better served with the \$80 million Caltrans is spending on Route 84.

"They'd love the money because they've got a safety problem on the road and they can't get any money to upgrade the road," Dubinsky said. "They've reported at least nine people killed since 2004 and numerous accidents. The people are pleading for money. There certainly are needs out there for safety improvement, but we do not believe Niles Canyon Road represents that type of need."

Steven Wilson, a Save Niles Canyon member, said some people are appalled at the number of trees already cut down in phase one.

"Caltrans seems to be looking at this in black and white. There are no shades of gray," he said. "They want to just widen the entire canyon for 8-foot wide shoulders, and that is what is causing the ripping out of all these trees. We do not want Niles Canyon to become a freeway, we want it to remain a scenic highway."

Wasserman said he understood the speakers' concerns.

"I drove through there Sunday and could not believe what they had torn out of there," he said. "They said this was a minor beginning phase. What they've done is not minor, and it's only going to get worse."

Jim Pierson, the city's public works director, said Caltrans told City of Fremont 77 trees had been removed from the project area. Pierson said staff took their own survey and found close to 100 trees are gone.

Councilwoman Anu Natarajan said the city needs to communicate in the letter to Brown and Newsom that it plans to initiate a ban on trucks in the Niles Canyon to increase traffic safety.

In February, the council voted to begin discussion with Caltrans in banning large trucks in Niles Canyon along Route 84. City of Fremont staffers reported then that trucks cause 38 percent of the accidents in the canyon, yet make up 2.5 percent of the vehicles that use Route 84 on a daily basis.

Pierson said the city is working with Caltrans to initiate the ban, which would have to be enacted by the state agency.

Vice Mayor Sue Chan said she was shocked neighboring Union City which entered into a memorandum of understanding with Fremont, Caltrans and

the Alameda County Transportation Authority for the project has not formally expressed concerns.

"I was shocked to see the number of trees they've cut down," Chan said. "To realize this could happen... I'm surprised Union City has not made any comment at all, because it's apparent how the landscape has now been changed forever."

Chan said because Newsom is a pro-environment politician, as he stated at Solaria's grand opening April 22, the city should send him a letter as well, and maybe something more will happen.

Staff is expected to return with a draft letter for the council to review and approve at a future council meeting.