

Citizen groups blast Caltrans' Niles Canyon bridge replacement

By Chris De Benedetti

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FREMONT -- The yearslong debate over widening the highway through Niles Canyon has continued, as environmental groups this month blasted Caltrans' Alameda Creek Bridge project.

Caltrans says that replacing the 87-year-old bridge would improve safety for drivers and bicyclists on a half-mile stretch of Niles Canyon Road, a winding highway that connects Fremont to Interstate 680 near Sunol.

But opponents, including citizen groups and environmentalists, say the project would damage wildlife habitat and reduce driving safety by increasing the speed limit in parts of the scenic canyon.

"(It's) anything but a simple bridge replacement -- it involves ... removing hundreds of native trees and excavating along thousands of feet of the canyon, adding large retaining walls," Alameda Creek Alliance director Jeff Miller said. "Caltrans' overbuilt approach is simply not needed to make the bridge segment safer."

The state agency says the \$24 million project will increase the bridge's total width to 42 feet, giving bicyclists and motorists more room to maneuver. Caltrans would widen the roadway's two lanes and add modern safety railings and 8-foot shoulders on each side. Those changes "have been proven to provide improved safety benefits," Caltrans spokesman Marcus Wagner said. "The project is not expected to increase speed in the corridor. The project ... will allow a safe, consistent speed."

The state agency aims to offset adverse environmental changes caused by construction, the spokesman said. "Caltrans is incorporating many mitigation elements," he said, "including providing bat roosts, removing creek obstructions to improve fish passage and replanting trees."

If all goes well, Wagner said, Caltrans hopes to break ground by the fall of 2017.

The state agency has considered replacing the aging Alameda Creek Bridge since 1998. Caltrans initially proposed three projects, budgeted for \$80 million, to widen Niles Canyon Road, also known as Highway 84. But citizen organizations and Fremont city leaders opposed much of the plans, saying they would ruin the lush canyon's beauty by adding 2 miles of concrete retaining walls.

In early 2011, Caltrans cut down more than 80 trees in the canyon while preparing its first project. Miller and Alameda Creek Alliance then challenged the agency's environmental review in a lawsuit that deemed the report inadequate. A few months later, an Alameda County Superior Court judge's order halted construction in Niles Canyon, saying that Caltrans had failed to notify the public about the project's approval. Caltrans later abandoned the project as part of its agreement to settle the lawsuit.

Four years later, Caltrans' new attempt to widen the road is being resisted by many of the same opponents.

Groups such as Save Niles Canyon, the Bay Area Transportation Working Group, and Citizens Committee to Complete the Refuge criticized the bridge replacement plan last week as they commented on its environmental impact report.

Opponents say they do not oppose fixing the highway's unsafe spots. But they are disappointed that Caltrans' latest proposal, its first since the 2011 dispute, "doesn't seem that different" from previous ones, Miller said.

"It sets off warning bells for us," he said. "It's supposed to be a small project with one bridge, but it's already overbuilt, and it gives us insight as to what they plan to do next."