

Federal Highway Agency Rejects Caltrans' Uniform Highway Widening Approach for Niles Canyon Road

FHA Proposes Safety Measures Within Existing Roadway, Improvements for Five Dangerous Spots; Suggests Less Environmentally Damaging Approach for Canyon

Media Advisory, July 31, 2012

Contact: Jeff Miller, Alameda Creek Alliance, (510) 499-9185

Fremont, CA – At a public meeting held by Caltrans last night to hear the preliminary findings of the Federal Highway Administration's Road Safety Assessment for Highway 84 in Niles Canyon, the FHA stated that Caltrans' proposed highway widening project through Niles Canyon is not warranted by the state's safety data. The FHA proposed several dozen immediate measures within the existing roadway that can be quickly and inexpensively implemented to reduce vehicle collisions, and site-specific projects for five priority locations in Niles Canyon to reduce accidents.

"The FHA seems genuinely interested in proposing reasonable safety solutions that do not involve needless environmental destruction of Alameda Creek or Niles Canyon," said Jeff Miller, director of the Alameda Creek Alliance. "We hope Caltrans will indeed start with the 'clean slate' they are promising for the Niles Canyon highway safety projects and take FHA recommendations and community input on appropriate safety measures seriously."

A Federal Highway Administration team of safety experts, independent of Caltrans, evaluated accident data in Niles Canyon since 2007, when a center-line rumble strip was installed that dramatically reduced collisions. The FHA also looked at traffic patterns and motorist behaviors to determine whether and where safety improvements are needed. The team identified five problem areas and developed possible safety-solution concepts. More than 200 members of the public opposed to Caltrans' highway widening project attended the hearing to comment and ask questions.

The five locations the FHA recommends Caltrans focus on are: 1) the narrow Rosewarnes undercrossing near the bottom of the canyon; 2) a low-speed curve near "The Spot"; 3) the Palomares Road intersection; 4) the intersections of Main Street and Pleasanton-Sunol Road with Hwy 84 in the town of Sunol; and 5) the Alameda Creek bridge in the middle of the canyon. The FHA is developing potential safety treatments for these locations that minimize environmental, visual and cultural impacts. The FHA is proposing less extensive treatments for other areas of the canyon such as improving gravel shoulders to pavement, adding additional turnouts, extending some existing roadway shoulders and selected vegetation removal.

The FHA proposes a monitoring program to see how the immediate measures and site-specific projects improve safety and reduce collisions, before looking at the possible "need" in the long-term for more extensive road widening. In addition to motorist safety, the FHA is interested in safer conditions for bicyclists, although Niles Canyon Road does not lend itself to safe bicycle use, while an independent hiker-biker trail through the canyon would. The FHA will publish the Road Safety Assessment report in August.

"Based on the brief FHA presentation, some of their preliminary ideas have promise, such as paving existing gravel shoulders, installing traffic lights, extending some turnouts, and realigning small sections of roadway away from the creek toward hillsides at some problem areas," said Miller. "Some of the solutions we will advocate include traffic calming (slowing vehicle speeds down in dangerous areas) through use of flashing and traffic lights, rumble strips, radar feedback signs and enforcement. We look forward to suggesting, commenting on and evaluating any specific fixes at genuine safety problem areas to make sure they are warranted, effective and done with minimal environmental impact."

At the hearing Caltrans promised a “clean slate” on the Niles Canyon highway safety projects and claimed it will consider FHA recommendations even if they do not comport with Caltrans guidelines. After the FHA report is finished Caltrans will give the community a month to review it, then hold a public meeting to discuss the findings in more detail. Caltrans will meet with stakeholders and the public before proposing new revised projects. After that they will begin a new environmental review process.

The presentations on the FHA’s preliminary findings from last night’s meeting are posted on the Caltrans District 4 web site: [Road Safety Assessment](#)  and [View Analysis Presentation](#) 

Find out more about the Alameda Creek Alliance’s campaign to [Protect Niles Canyon](#)

Background

Caltrans initially proposed three phases of a highway safety project for much of Niles Canyon Road between Fremont and Interstate 680, with 12-foot lanes, 2-foot median, and 8-foot shoulders throughout the canyon. This would require cutting 600 trees along Alameda Creek and filling the creek and floodplain with four miles of cement retaining walls and rip-rap to accommodate unnecessarily wide roadway shoulders, damaging habitat for steelhead trout, Alameda whipsnakes and red-legged frogs and removing rare sycamore forest. Caltrans did not focus on localized problem areas or evaluate simple solutions within the existing roadway such as signal lights, radar speed signs, median barriers or additional rumble strips.

Caltrans internally “approved” phase one of the project in 2006 without alerting the public that it had been finalized. Caltrans filed a “Negative Declaration,” claiming no significant environmental impacts, rather than the required Environmental Impact Report for a project with significant impacts. Caltrans cut nearly 100 trees in the canyon in spring of 2011. The Alameda Creek Alliance filed suit challenging the inadequate environmental review, winning a court order halting construction in June 2011 and a settlement agreement from Caltrans in December 2011 requiring them to abandon the project. An Alameda Superior Court judge [excoriated](#) the agency’s clandestine project approval and obstruction of the public process.