Notice of Preparation of a Draft Environmental Impact Report for the Interstate 5 El Toro Road Interchange Project

The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), in cooperation with the Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA), is issuing this Notice of Preparation (NOP) for a project-level Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the Interstate (I) 5 El Toro Interchange Project to initiate scoping and solicit input. Caltrans is the lead agency under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and is preparing an EIR in accordance with CEQA and an Environmental Assessment (EA) in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) for the Proposed Project. The environmental document will be prepared as a joint document pursuant to CEQA and NEPA. This is the Caltrans Project Approval and Environmental Document (PA&ED) phase for this Project.

Pursuant to CEQA, Caltrans is distributing this NOP and initiating this early consultation/scoping to notify the responsible agencies, trustee agencies, the Office of Planning and Research, the County Clerk and involved federal agencies, and members of the public that an EIR/EA is being prepared. The purpose is to solicit guidance from those agencies and members of the public on the scope and content regarding potential significant environmental issues, reasonable alternatives, and reasonable mitigation measures that should be discussed in the EIR/EA.

Caltrans proposes to improve traffic flow, optimize traffic signalization, improve mobility, and reduce freeway traffic queuing adjacent to the I-5/El Toro Road Interchange.

Project Location

The Project proposes to modify and improve the existing I-5/El Toro Road Interchange in the cities of Lake Forest, Laguna Woods, and Laguna Hills in Orange County, California. The project limits on I-5 extend from approximately 0.1 mile south of Los Alisos Boulevard Overcrossing (Post Mile [PM] 17.8) to 0.4 mile north of Ridge Route Drive (PM 19.7), and on El Toro Road from Rockfield Boulevard to Paseo De Valencia, a distance of approximately 1.9 miles

Project History

The I-5 corridor serves as a vital north-south link throughout the State. It provides for the interregional, interstate, and international movement of goods and vehicles to and from Mexico and Canada. In Orange County, I-5 serves as the primary link connecting Orange County to San Diego and Los Angeles Counties. The I-5 freeway serves the cities of Laguna Hills, Laguna Woods, and City of Lake Forest within the project study area. In addition, the I-5/El Toro Road Interchange is the primary access to the Laguna Hills Mall, as well as local businesses and residential communities in these three cities.

Within the project limits, I-5 has five (5) existing general-purpose lanes, an auxiliary lane, and two (2) high occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes that merge into one lane just south of the El Toro

Road Undercrossing (UC) in the southbound (SB) direction. In the northbound (NB) direction, the existing configuration includes five (5) general-purpose lanes, an auxiliary lane, and one HOV lane in the northbound (NB) direction, and a second HOV lane starts up just north of the interchange.

The adjacent communities using the El Toro Interchange for access have reached build-out conditions. The high demand and short spacing between adjacent local intersections have resulted in heavy traffic congestion during the weekday peak hours, weekends, and holidays. In early 2019, a Draft Initial Study/Environmental Assessment (IS/EA) was circulated for public review for the proposed Project. During the Project Approval/Environmental Document phase (PA/ED), the consensus on a preferred Alternative on the IS/EA was not achieved due to lack of local support. Subsequently, OCTA embarked to initiate an Alternatives Assessment Study in order to take "one more look" at the I-5/El Toro Road interchange, to see if there was any other alternative interchange configuration(s) that could be developed to handle the SB traffic exiting at El Toro Road. The goal of the conceptual interchange configurations was to meet the Purpose & Need of the project, which would reduce traffic congestion, improve on & off-ramps operation (reduce off-ramp queuing), improve traffic flow, and traffic signal optimization for the SB traffic exiting at El Toro Road. Only three build alternatives will be studied in the EIR/EA as discussed below. The two Build Alternatives (Alternatives 2 and 4) proposed in the draft IS/EA have been eliminated.

Description of Project

Purpose and Need

The purpose of the project is to:

- Improve traffic flow and traffic signal optimization
- Improve traffic mobility through adjacent local street intersections
- Reduce freeway ramp queuing
- Applying technology to help manage traffic demand

The Build Alternatives would improve existing and future regional mobility and traffic flow to and from the local street network, be consistent with local planning and consider potential impacts to right-of-way. In addition, congestion relief on the mainline ramps and local streets would serve to improve mobility.

Need

The area within the I-5/El Toro Road Interchange experiences:

- traffic delays due to the high traffic volumes
- Geometric deficiencies related to inadequate signal operations and intersection spacing

- Major delays due to traffic queueing at the intersections of the on- and off-ramps and local streets

This has affected both the traffic operations and circulation within the Study Area.

Project Alternatives

Four alternatives are proposed for consideration, one No Build and three Build Alternatives.

No-Build Alternative

The No Build Alternative proposes no action, where no construction or improvements would be made to the I-5/El Toro Road Interchange apart from proposed projects that are under development or concurrently in construction. The No Build Alternative would not address the issues and deficiencies within the project limits.

Build Alternative AA-1

Build Alternative AA-1 proposes an additional I-5 SB off-ramp to independently serve El Toro Road to the east and to the west. These two SB off-ramps are proposed in lieu of the one existing SB offramp. This would be accomplished with a two-lane I-5 SB off-ramp to El Toro Road would be split with one lane assigned to El Toro Road west, using the existing hook ramp, while one lane would be assigned to El Toro Road east that is braided over the SB hook on-ramp. This ramp would then travel over El Toro Road on a new bridge and would then tie into a realigned Avenida De La Carlota by the Laguna Hills Mall area. A new SB hook on-ramp would be provided along the realigned Avenida De La Carlota. The existing SB direct on-ramp from El Toro Road would be eliminated, while the existing access provided by the SB ramps, opposite Paseo De La Valencia, would be maintained. The NB ramps would be in a similar configuration as today, with improvements made by I-5 Segment 3, which is currently under construction (Figure 3).

Build Alternative AA-5

Build Alternative AA-5 proposes an I-5 SB flyover off-ramp to independently serve El Toro Road to the east, and a separate hook off-ramp for El Toro to the west. This would be accomplished with a 2-lane I-5 SB offramp to El Toro Road that would be split with one lane assigned to El Toro Road west, using the existing hook ramp, while one lane would be assigned to El Toro Road east that would be a flyover that connects to both El Toro Road and Rockfield Boulevard. The flyover ramp would connect into a roundabout that provides access to El Toro Road east and would provide access to Los Alisos Boulevard (Figure 4).

Build Alternative - Transportation System Management (TSM) and Transportation Demand Management (TDM)

Caltrans will evaluate a standalone TSM/TDM Alternative. TSM strategies increase the efficiency of existing facilities; they are actions that increase the number of vehicle trips a facility can carry without increasing the number of through lanes. Examples of TSM strategies for this project include ramp metering, signal timing, signal coordination, and intersection technology.

TDM focuses on regional means of reducing the number of vehicle trips and vehicle miles traveled as well as increasing vehicle occupancy. As an example, a regional agency could actively promote ridesharing, maintain rideshare databases, and provide limited rideshare services to employers and individuals.

Environmental Factors

The purpose of the PA&ED phase is to explore study the effects of the proposed project on the physical, human, and natural environment. Caltrans will evaluate the anticipated environmental, social, and economic impacts of the construction and operation of the Proposed Project. Impact areas to be addressed in the EIR/EA include, but may not be limited to the following areas:

Air Quality and Greenhouse Emissions

Construction activities may result in temporary increases in fugitive dust and emissions from construction equipment and vehicles. An Air Quality Study (AQS) will be prepared and will quantify construction emissions and assess the potential for exposure to asbestos, lead, mobile source air toxic emissions, and cumulative effects. The AQS will also evaluate project-related regional changes in long-term mobile source emissions.

Land Use and Planning

The project is expected to result in minor permanent changes in General Plan land use designations as a result of the incorporation of land not currently designated for transportation uses into the I-5/El Toro Road Interchange. Potential effects will be further evaluated in the Community Impact Assessment (CIA) and EIR.

Noise

Construction activities may result in short-term noise effects during construction of the proposed project. Additionally, traffic within the project limits may potentially result in long-term noise effects. The analysis conducted will consider existing and future planned land uses and the effect of future planned transportation improvements related noise effects will be further evaluated in the Noise Study Report (NSR), Noise Abatement Decision Report (NADR), and EIR.

Public Services/Utilities and Service Systems

Construction of the project may result in temporary service disruptions to some public services/utilities and services systems in the project area. Potential effects to public services, including but not limited to fire protection, police protection, nearby schools, nearby parks, and other public facilities will be further evaluated in the CIA and EIR.

Parks and Recreation/Section 4(f)

The project is expected to result in the permanent partial acquisition of land from Cavanaugh Park along I-5, which is outside of the existing Caltrans right-of-way. Potential effects and mitigation will be further evaluated in the CIA, Section 4(f) Study and the EIR.

Community Impacts

The project is expected to result in the permanent full and partial acquisitions of land from commercial properties, which are outside of the existing Caltrans right-of-way. Potential effects will be further evaluated in the CIA and the EIR.

Hazards and Hazardous Materials

Potential hazardous waste effects related to roadway projects can involve aerially deposited lead (ADL), asbestos-containing materials (ACM) and lead based paint (LBP) and other unknown contamination in the soil and/or groundwater. The potential effects related to these potential contaminations will be further evaluated in the Initial Site Assessment (ISA) and EIR.

Traffic/Transportation

Effects during construction of the proposed project my include temporary lane and/or potential partial roadway closures along I-5. A Traffic Management Plan (TMP) will be developed and implemented to identify traffic handling practices and public awareness activities that will inform the public regarding potential partial closures and provide detours with consistent access for vehicles. A comprehensive traffic analysis was conducted to assess all the Build Alternatives. And the analysis shown that all of the alternatives are projected to improve interchange traffic operations and ramp operations (reduce ramp queuing). The traffic analysis will focus on Project improvements to freeway and roadway operations in the project area and calculate vehicle miles travelled (VMT) with and without the Project. Traffic effects related to these project components will be further evaluated in the Traffic Report (TOAR) and the EIR.

Visual/Aesthetics

Temporary effects resulting from the construction of the project would potentially include exposure of sensitive uses to views of the project limits. Construction of the project would potentially expose surfaces, construction debris, equipment, and truck traffic to nearby sensitive viewers. In addition, some Build Alternatives would construct a new bridge for the southbound I-5 off-ramp traffic. Based on the conceptual design, the bridge would be at a

higher profile than the existing mainline and would extend south from the existing southbound El Toro Road off-ramp, over El Toro Road. The higher profile of the bridge may result in moderate visual effects. Potential effects will be further studied and included in the Visual Impact Assessment (VIA) and the EIR.

Geology and Soils

A preliminary geotechnical design report will be prepared and will consider potential geotechnical, geologic and seismic effects. The project will be designed in accordance with the Caltrans Highway Manual. Sound walls, retaining walls, and bridges will be designed in accordance with the applicable Caltrans Seismic Design criteria.

Paleontological Resources

A paleontological study will be prepared for the proposed project and will provide information on the potential to affect paleontological resources and identify appropriate avoidance, minimization, and mitigation measures.

Water Quality

Construction activities and operations of the proposed project could result in short-term and long-term effects to Aliso Creek and San Diego Creek. Effects during construction may include erosion and sedimentation associated with the disturbance of soil, and discharge of pollutants associated with construction activities. A stormwater pollution prevention plan will be prepared and implemented to provide appropriate construction best management practices and other measures to address the potential for adverse effects during construction. The proposed project is anticipated to result in an increase of impervious surfaces, which has the potential for long-term water quality effects during project operations. Permanent stormwater treatment facilities are anticipated to be included in the project in accordance with National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System permit requirements. The potential need for hydromodification management control measures will be evaluated in the Water Quality Assessment Report and Hydraulic Studies, and, if necessary, appropriate control measures will be incorporated in the project.

Public Scoping Period

The public scoping period for the project was initially conducted from July 11, 2023 to August 25, 2023. In response to comments received during the initial public scoping period we are extending the public scoping period for an additional 45 days (November 1, 2023- December 18, 2023) to provide additional time for the public, resource agencies, and stakeholders to provide input on the depth and breadth of issues that should be addressed in the environmental document. Comments received during this extended scoping period will become part of the public record and will be considered in developing the environmental document and defining the project scope.

Caltrans is interested in whether there are areas of environmental concern that should be identified as having the potential for impacts. In response to this NOP, public agencies with jurisdiction are requested to advise Caltrans of the applicable permit and environmental review requirements of each agency, and the scope and content of the environmental information that is germane to the agency's statutory responsibilities in connection with the Proposed Project.

Comments

Comments can be submitted during the public scoping period (November 1, 2023- December 18, 2023) in any of the following formats

- Via mail to Gabriela Duran, Caltrans District 12: Environmental Department, 1750 East Fourth Street, Suite 100, Santa Ana, CA 92705
- Email comments to **D12.ELToro@dot.ca.gov** with the subject line **"I-5 El Toro Road Interchange Project".**
- Online comment form at the Caltrans website: **https://dot.ca.gov/caltrans-near-me/district-12/district-12-programs/district-12-environmental/i-5-el-toro-road-interchange-improvement-project**

Please submit your comments no later than **5 p.m. on Monday December 18, 2023**.

If you have previously provided comments between July 12, 2023, and August 25, 2023, your comments will be considered by the project development team as appropriate. If you submitted your comments via United States Postal Service mail during the initial comment period, we respectfully request that you resubmit your comment letter during the extended scoping period.

Additional Information

The Notice of Preparation and additional project materials will be available for public review and comment at **https://dot.ca.gov/caltrans-near-me/district-12/district-12-programs/district-12-environmental/i-5-el-toro-road-interchange-improvement-project**

The NOP and additional project materials will also be available at the following locations for viewing during normal business hours:

- Caltrans District 12, 1750 E. 4th St., Ste. 100, Santa Ana, CA 92705
- El Toro Library, 24672 Raymond Way, Lake Forest, CA 92630
- Laguna Woods Village Library, 24266 Calle Aragon, Laguna Woods, CA 92637
- Laguna Hills Technology Library, 25555 Alicia Pkwy, Laguna Hills, CA 92653

To obtain more information on the Proposed Project, scoping process, and scoping meetings, please visit the Caltrans website above. To request alternative accommodations for accessing project information or for attending public scoping meetings, please contact the District 12 Public Information Office at (657) 328-6000. TDD users may contact the California Relay Service line at 1 (800) 735-2929 or Voice Line at 1(800) 735-2922. Requests for alternative accommodations to attend scoping meetings must be made 15 days prior to the scoping meeting.