

Notice of Preparation of a
Draft Environmental Impact Report/Environmental Assessment
and Notice of Scoping Online Open House

**Highway 1 Auxiliary Lanes and Bus-on-Shoulder Improvements
—Freedom Boulevard to State Park Drive—
and Coastal Rail Trail Segment 12 Project**

Santa Cruz County, CA

Introduction

The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), in association with the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission (SCCRTC) and the County of Santa Cruz (County), proposes improvements along State Highway Route 1 (SR 1) and the Santa Cruz Branch Line railroad right of way, within an unincorporated area of the County. Improvements under consideration include the construction of auxiliary lanes, implementation of bus-on-shoulder (BOS) operations, widening and replacement of bridges, construction of Segment 12 of the Coastal Rail Trail, and the installation of sound walls and retaining walls.

Caltrans plans to prepare a joint Environmental Impact Report/Environmental Assessment (EIR/EA) pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Caltrans is the lead agency under CEQA and will also serve as the lead agency for the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) under its NEPA assignment memorandum of understanding with FHWA.

Caltrans is distributing this Notice of Preparation to request comments from responsible and trustee agencies and interested members of the public regarding the significant environmental issues, reasonable project alternatives, and reasonable mitigation measures to be explored in the draft EIR/EA.

Project Location

The proposed auxiliary lanes and bus-on-shoulder improvements would extend approximately 2.7 miles along SR 1 in unincorporated Santa Cruz County between the Freedom Boulevard interchange and the State Park Drive interchange, from post mile (PM) 10.7 to PM 8.1. The proposed Coastal Rail Trail Segment 12 would extend approximately 1.25 miles along the Santa Cruz Branch Line railroad, between Rio Del Mar Boulevard and State Park Drive. The project location is shown in Figure 1.

Project Purpose and Need

The purpose of the project is to:

- Reduce congestion along SR 1 through the project limits
- Enhance bicycle and pedestrian connectivity by providing a segment of the Coastal Rail Trail
- Promote the use of alternative transportation modes to increase transportation system capacity and reliability
- Reconstruct railroad bridges over SR 1 to accommodate the widened highway and Coastal Rail Trail crossings of SR 1

This project is needed because:

- Several bottlenecks along SR 1 in the southbound and northbound directions cause congestion during peak hours, significantly delaying drivers.
- “Cut-through” traffic, or traffic on local streets, is increasing because drivers are seeking to avoid congestion on the highway.
- There are limited opportunities for pedestrians and bicyclists to safely get across SR 1 and navigate the project corridor, even though portions of the project area are designated as regional bicycle routes.
- There are insufficient incentives to increase transit service in the SR 1 corridor because congestion threatens reliability and cost-effective transit service delivery.

Project Background

Auxiliary lane improvements on SR 1 in the project area were addressed previously in a combined Tier I/Tier II EIR with a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI), which was adopted in December 2018. The Tier I component, referred to as the corridor improvement project, proposed approximately 8.9 miles of new high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes, HOV on-ramp bypass lanes, auxiliary lanes, pedestrian and bicycle overcrossings, and reconstructed interchanges. It was recognized that the Tier I project would likely be implemented in phases. The first phase of the corridor improvements was analyzed in the Tier II component of the Tier I/Tier II EIR/FONSI, which included auxiliary lanes between 41st Avenue and Soquel Avenue/Drive and other improvements within the Tier II project limits. The second phase of the improvements is currently under environmental review and is identified as the Highway 1 State Park Drive to Bay/Porter Auxiliary Lanes Project.

The proposed project includes the third phase of the improvements described in the Tier I and Tier II EIR/FONSI. The SCCRTC developed an implementation plan for building out the Tier I corridor improvement project based on traffic operation criteria to ensure that each phase identified as a future construction-level project would have independent utility because it would individually provide a benefit to traffic operations on SR 1.

Bus-on-shoulder improvements on SR 1 within the project area are included in the proposed project based on recommendations of previous studies, described as follows. The Monterey Bay Area Feasibility Study of Bus-on-Shoulder Operations on State Route 1 and the Monterey Branch Line concluded that a hybrid auxiliary lane/bus-on-shoulder project on SR 1 between the Morrissey and Freedom Boulevard interchanges could cost effectively provide transit benefits in the corridor. The subsequent Bus-on-Shoulder Concept of Operations set forth a framework for the design, implementation and operation of a bus-on-shoulder facility on SR 1.

The proposed Coastal Rail Trail Segment 12 was addressed previously in the EIR on the Master Plan for the Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail Network project, which evaluated environmental impacts of the Trail Network Master Plan at a programmatic level of analysis. The Final EIR was certified in November 2013. The Master Plan for the Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail (Coastal Rail Trail) was developed to establish a continuous alignment, connecting spurs, and set of design standards for a multi-use trail for the length of Santa Cruz County. Various segments of the Coastal Rail Trail are proceeding separately through the CEQA environmental review, design, permitting, and construction phases of project development.

The proposed project has independent utility and logical termini. The auxiliary lanes and bus-on-shoulder improvements would specifically improve congested conditions on the SR 1 corridor between the Freedom Boulevard interchange and the State Park Drive interchange. The proposed auxiliary lanes and bus-on-shoulder improvements between these two interchanges would function without requiring additional improvements outside the project area. Additionally, the proposed Coastal Rail Trail Segment 12 would provide improved safety for pedestrian and bicycle travel along the SR 1 corridor between Rio Del Mar Boulevard and State Park Drive, addressing the need to safely cross SR 1 and safely navigate the corridor independent of other safety and alternative transportation improvements outside the proposed project area. Development of the proposed project would not restrict consideration of alternatives for other reasonably foreseeable transportation improvements.

Project Description

The Project proposes to widen SR 1 to accommodate auxiliary lanes and bus-on-shoulder features in the northbound and southbound directions between the Freedom Boulevard interchange and the State Park Drive interchange, from PM 10.7 to PM 8.1. The major improvements include widening of the two bridges over Aptos Creek and Spreckels Drive, replacing the two railroad bridges over SR 1, and construction of a bicycle and pedestrian trail along an approximately 1.25-mile segment of the Santa Cruz Branch Line railroad right of way, from Rio Del Mar Boulevard State Park Drive. The Santa Cruz Branch Line railroad corridor is an active freight line and is owned by the SCCRTC.

The auxiliary lanes would connect the interchange entrance and exit ramps, thereby extending the weaving and merging distance between the ramps and improving traffic flow by allowing greater separation between vehicles entering and exiting the freeway from mainline traffic. The proposed bus-on-shoulder improvements would support future bus operations on the shoulders of SR 1 during peak congestion periods to achieve transit travel time and reliability improvements.

The proposed trail segment, Coastal Rail Trail Segment 12, is part of the proposed Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail within the 32-mile coastal rail corridor from Watsonville to Davenport. The proposed Coastal Rail Trail improvements include the construction of a paved bicycle and pedestrian shared use trail on the inland side of the tracks, a fence separating the new trail from the rail line, and the modification or replacement of two existing railroad bridges that cross Aptos Creek and Valencia Creek, respectively, to accommodate the new trail.

The Project is anticipated to require right of way acquisitions and utility relocations to accommodate the pavement widening and bridge work. Temporary construction easements are anticipated to be needed to construct retaining walls, soundwalls, and the bridges. The Project area is shown in Figure 1, Project Area.

Potential Environmental Effects

The project is expected to result in temporary and permanent environmental effects. The draft EIR/EA will determine what resources would be affected, the level of significance of these impacts, and feasible avoidance, minimization and mitigation measures to lessen the impacts. Based on preliminary information, potential environmental effects of the proposed project are outlined below.

Air Quality and Greenhouse Gas Emissions

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

Biological Resources

Preliminary studies indicate that the project may result in potential impacts to federally listed animal species (steelhead belonging to the Central California Coast Distinct Population Segment (DPS), tidewater goby, California red-legged frog, least Bell's vireo, southwestern willow flycatcher, as well as Santa Cruz long-toed salamander, which is also listed under the California Endangered Species Act and is a State Fully Protected species) or their habitat, the State Fully Protected species white-tailed kite, California Rare Plant Rank species, California Species of Special Concern, and nesting birds. Impacts to wetlands and waters of the United States may also occur. A fish passage

assessment will be completed to identify potential barriers to upstream and downstream migration of anadromous fish that may be present in the biological study area. Any project-related impacts to fish passage will be studied. A Natural Environment Study will be prepared (including an Aquatic Resources Delineation), and a Biological Assessment will be prepared as part of the Section 7 Endangered Species Act consultation process with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service. Coordination with Santa Cruz County, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the Regional Water Quality Control Board is also anticipated.

Cultural Resources

Previous technical studies have indicated elevated sensitivity for prehistoric archaeological resources within the project area. Additionally, portions of a known multi-component archaeological resource site are unevaluated and require subsurface investigation to make an eligibility determination for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. There is also potential for historic architectural resources to occur within the project area. Research, fieldwork, and technical reporting will be undertaken to identify cultural resources in the project's Area of Potential Effects, in accordance with Caltrans guidelines and Programmatic Agreement pursuant to Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. The draft EIR/EA will provide information on the potential to affect cultural resources and identify appropriate avoidance, minimization, and mitigation measures.

Geology and Soils

A preliminary geotechnical design report will be prepared and will consider potential geotechnical, geologic and seismic impacts. Appropriate avoidance, minimization, and mitigation measures will be identified. 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.

Hazardous Waste and Materials

An Initial Site Assessment (ISA) prepared for the Tier I Project found that potentially hazardous materials may be present along SR 1 within the limits of the currently proposed project. This may include aerially deposited lead, asbestos-containing materials, lead-containing paint, treated wood waste, and yellow thermoplastic traffic stripe. The potential presence of these and other potentially hazardous materials will be evaluated in an ISA for the proposed project, which will identify appropriate avoidance, minimization, and mitigation measures to provide for proper handling, reuse, disposal, and treatment of hazardous materials.

Hydrology, Floodplain, and Sea Level Rise

The proposed project has the potential to result in floodplain encroachment by increasing base flood water surface elevations of Aptos Creek due to bridge improvements. A Floodplain Evaluation Report will be prepared that will identify feasible measures to avoid, minimize, and mitigate adverse impacts related to flooding. Additionally, the project site is located within an area that is susceptible to sea level rise (SLR). The project will take into account State and federal guidance for incorporating SLR projections into planning and decision-making.

Hydromodification, Water Quality, and Stormwater Runoff

Construction activities and operations of the proposed project could result in short-term and long-term impacts to Aptos and Valencia Creeks, portions of which are within the project limits, and Valencia Lagoon, which is located near the proposed project. Impacts 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 impacts during construction. The project is anticipated to result in an increase of impervious surfaces, which has the potential for long-term water quality impacts 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 and, if necessary, appropriate control measures will be incorporated in the project.

Land Use and Coastal Zone

Portions of the project area are located in the Coastal Zone, and the project may potentially affect resources protected by the federal Coastal Zone Management Act (CZMA), California Coastal Act, and the Santa Cruz County Local Coastal Plan. A Coastal Development Permit pursuant to the California Coastal Act is anticipated to be required. The draft EIR/EA will provide information on potential impacts and identify appropriate avoidance, minimization, and mitigation measures to reduce impacts on sensitive resources in the Coastal Zone, such as biological resources, water quality, parks and recreational resources.

Noise

Construction activities may result in short-term noise impacts during construction of the proposed project. Additionally, traffic on auxiliary lanes and bus-on-shoulder operations may potentially result in long-term noise impacts. The proposed Coastal Rail Trail has the potential to result in long-term noise impacts for nearby residences, such as sound generated by trail users, maintenance workers and dogs. A noise study will be

conducted and will identify appropriate measures to minimize and mitigate noise impacts.

Paleontological Resources

The Paleontological Evaluation Report (PER) and Addendum to the PER prepared for the Tier I and Tier II Project identified the potential for paleontological resources to occur in within the limits of the currently proposed project. 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.

Parks and Recreational Facilities

Construction activities for the proposed project has the potential for temporary traffic impacts such as lane closures along SR 1 (described below), which may adversely affect access to nearby public parks and recreational facilities such as the Forest of Nisene Monks State Park, Seacliff State Beach, Aptos Village County Park, Polo Grounds Park, Aptos Seascapes Golf Course, Rio del Mar Park, and Rio del Mar Beach. No parkland is located within the project limits, and construction activities would not occur on park property.

Transportation and Traffic

Impacts during construction of the proposed project may include temporary lane and/or partial roadway closures along SR 1. Work associated with bridge modification or replacement has potential to result in temporary lane or partial roadway closures of Spreckels Drive and Seacliff Drive. A construction period traffic management plan will be developed and implemented to identify traffic handling practices and public awareness activities that will inform the public regarding closures and provide detours with consistent access for vehicles and bicycles. Operations of the proposed Coastal Rail Trail improvements could result in potential conflicts between trail users and automobile traffic at the trail crossings of roadways. Overall, it is anticipated that auxiliary lanes and bus-on-shoulder improvements would improve traffic congestion and enhance safety, and that the proposed Coastal Rail Trail improvements would enhance transportation safety for bicycle and pedestrian modes of travel.

Utilities and Emergency Services

The temporary relocation of utilities may be required during construction due to project activities such as pavement widening and the proposed replacement or modification of the two vehicle bridges over Aptos Creek and Spreckels Drive, the two railroad bridges over Highway 1, the railroad bridge over Aptos Creek, and the railroad bridge over Valencia Creek. Additionally, any lane closures could affect emergency providers. The draft EIR/EA will identify feasible measures to avoid and minimize impacts on service providers and users.

Visual and Aesthetic Resources

The proposed project may result in short-term temporary impacts to visual and aesthetic resources during construction. Long-term impacts may include the degrading of visual quality due to removal of trees, addition of new retaining walls and sound walls, widening or replacement of bridges, and the introduction of Coastal Rail Trail facilities, including the proposed safety fence between the trail and the railroad tracks. Depending on further studies, lighting fixtures may be recommended in some locations along the proposed Coastal Rail Trail segment and could introduce new sources of lighting. A Visual Impact Assessment will be prepared that will identify feasible measures to avoid, minimize, and mitigate adverse impacts.

Scoping Meeting

An online scoping open house is being provided at the following link, <https://www.hwy1-freedom-statepark.com/>. Caltrans is accepting comments until October 18, 2020, at the online open house and via mail and email at the address below.

Lara Bertaina, Senior Environmental Planner
California Department of Transportation, District 5
50 Higuera Street
San Luis Obispo, CA 93401
Lara.Bertaina@dot.ca.gov

