

Notice of Preparation

Notice of Preparation

To: _____ From: _____

(Address) (Address)

Subject: Notice of Preparation of a Draft Environmental Impact Report

_____ will be the Lead Agency and will prepare an environmental impact report for the project identified below. We need to know the views of your agency as to the scope and content of the environmental information which is germane to your agency's statutory responsibilities in connection with the proposed project. Your agency will need to use the EIR prepared by our agency when considering your permit or other approval for the project.

The project description, location, and the potential environmental effects are contained in the attached materials. A copy of the Initial Study (is is not) attached.

Due to the time limits mandated by State law, your response must be sent at the earliest possible date but not later than 30 days after receipt of this notice.

Please send your response to _____ at the address shown above. We will need the name for a contact person in your agency.

Project Title: _____

Project Applicant, if any: _____

Date _____ Signature *Juergen Vespermann*
Title _____
E-mail _____

Reference: California Code of Regulations, Title 14, (CEQA Guidelines) Sections 15082(a), 15103, 15375.

Notice of Preparation of a Draft Environmental Impact Report for the Tulare City Widening Project

The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), the Lead Agency, is preparing an environmental document to address impacts associated with the proposed freeway widening and interchange improvement project on State Route 99 in Tulare, California. The document will be prepared as a joint document pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

Caltrans will be preparing an Environmental Impact Report/Environmental Assessment (EIR/EA) for the project, which is known as the Tulare City Widening project. As required by CEQA, Caltrans is distributing this Notice of Preparation and requesting comments from responsible and trustee agencies regarding the significant environmental issues, reasonable alternatives, and reasonable mitigation measures that will be discussed in the Environmental Impact Report/Environmental Assessment. An Initial Study has not been prepared for this project and therefore is not attached to this Notice of Preparation.

Project Location

The project stretches from just south of the Avenue 200 overcrossing to just north of the Prosperity Avenue overcrossing (post miles 25.4 to 30.6) in the City of Tulare in Tulare County.

Project History

Work began on this project in 2019. Prior to the start of formal environmental studies, the Design and Environmental teams reassessed the three build alternatives presented in the Project Initiation Document that was signed in 2009:

- Alternative 1 proposed widening the existing four-lane freeway to a six-lane freeway by constructing the new lanes in the median. An auxiliary lane would be added along the outside northbound lane between Bardsley Avenue and the Hillman Street off-ramp. Construction of that lane would require the acquisition of approximately 100 residences and some businesses. In addition, the existing overcrossings at Tulare Avenue (State Route 137), Tulare pedestrian overcrossing, and Cross Avenue would be reconstructed to raise the bridges.
- Alternative 2 proposed widening the existing four-lane freeway to an eight-lane freeway by constructing two additional lanes in each direction outside the existing lanes. All seven overcrossings would be reconstructed, as would all interchanges within the project limits. New drainage basins would be needed at five locations. This alternative would acquire more than 200 homes and businesses along both sides of the freeway.
- Alternative 3 proposed widening the existing four-lane freeway to a six-lane freeway by constructing the new lanes in the median. The inside and outside

shoulders would be widened. All work would take place within the existing Caltrans right-of-way; no right-of-way acquisition was anticipated.

On August 26, 2019, the Project Development Team, including the Tulare County Association of Governments and representatives of the City of Tulare, agreed to develop Alternative 3 as the sole build alternative for the project. The reasons that Alternatives 1 and 2 were not brought forward for environmental analysis were the excessive right-of-way acquisition costs, the large numbers of people who would have been displaced and required relocation, other community impacts including the potential for direct impacts to environmental justice neighborhoods, and impacts to Tulare Santa Fe Trail Park that would have required an Individual Section 4(f) analysis and mitigation.

At the request of the Tulare County Association of Governments, in the summer of 2020 Caltrans added reconstruction of the Paige Avenue interchange to the project design. This design included two roundabouts at the ramp termini.

During the initial environmental analysis process, Caltrans determined that an Environmental Impact Report would be needed to obtain environmental compliance under CEQA due to the increase in vehicle miles traveled (VMT) and increased greenhouse gasses generated by construction and operation of the facility. Because it has not yet been determined by Caltrans what types and amount of mitigation would be adequate to reduce a significant impact to “less than significant with mitigation” for vehicle miles traveled and greenhouse gasses, it was determined that the CEQA document should be elevated to an Environmental Impact Report. The Project Development Team, including the project sponsor Tulare County Association of Governments, agreed with the determination to prepare an Environmental Impact Report.

In January 2021, the Project Development Team, including the Tulare County Association of Governments and representatives of the City of Tulare, agreed to increase the scope of the project. The existing Paige Avenue overcrossing is now proposed to be removed and replaced with a new bridge, and two additional roundabouts on Paige Avenue would be built at Blackstone Street and Laspina Street.

Description of the Project

Caltrans proposes to widen State Route 99 in the City of Tulare from just south of the Avenue 200 overcrossing to just north of the Prosperity Avenue overcrossing (post miles 25.4 to 30.6). One lane would be constructed in each direction in the existing freeway median to create a six-lane freeway, divided by a concrete median barrier. The existing lanes and shoulders of mainline State Route 99, as well as the ramps, would be rehabilitated. A second lane would be added to the northbound and southbound Bardsley Avenue on-ramps. Ramp metering would be added at these interchanges: Paige Avenue, Bardsley Avenue, and Tulare Avenue (State Route 137). North of the Avenue 200 overcrossing, the existing southbound lanes would be realigned to adjoin the existing northbound lanes for a distance of about three-quarters of a mile (post miles 25.62 to 26.35) to eliminate a non-standard curve. Four new drainage basins would be

added. A landscape replacement project would be implemented after construction is completed.

In addition, the existing Paige Avenue interchange would be reconstructed to a tight diamond layout with roundabouts at the ramp ends. Two additional roundabouts would be constructed on Paige Avenue at Blackstone Street and Laspina Street. The Paige Avenue overcrossing would be replaced with a wider structure with two lanes in each direction and a pedestrian/bicycle shared path on both sides.

The project would potentially acquire narrow strips of land from commercial properties and vacant lots in the Paige Avenue interchange area and along the Bardsley Avenue interchange southbound and northbound on-ramps. A few commercial properties would potentially be full acquisitions.

Project Alternatives

One build alternative and the no-build alternative are proposed for this project.

Potential Environmental Effects of the Project

Aesthetics

Oleanders and trees in the median would be removed. Landscape trees and shrubs would be removed from the sides of the freeway to construct the project.

Air Quality

A project-level air quality conformity analysis is required because Tulare County is in nonattainment status for federal air quality standards for ozone, PM₁₀, and PM_{2.5}.

Biology

Initial biological surveys were conducted, and no impacts to species are anticipated. Potential impacts to the Tulare Main Canal will be determined.

Paleontology

Scientifically significant paleontological resources underlying the project area in the Quaternary Modesto Formation and the Pleistocene Riverbank Formation would be affected by the proposed project.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

This project does not achieve the State's greenhouse gas emissions reductions for 2029. Capacity-increasing projects require a quantitative analysis using emission factors models developed by the Air Resources Board to estimate greenhouse gas emissions.

Hazards and Hazardous Materials

Potential hazardous waste impacts involve asbestos-containing materials on buildings and structures, aerially deposited lead on surface soils, and petroleum hydrocarbons on

gas station properties. Preliminary Site Investigations would be prepared on affected private parcels to identify the extent of the contamination, if any, prior to parcel acquisition.

Noise

A preliminary noise study determined future noise levels would be higher at some locations adjacent to the new facility if the proposed project is built. Soundwalls will be proposed at locations where the design-year noise levels would exceed the federal Noise Abatement Criteria.

Transportation (Vehicle Miles Traveled)

Senate Bill 743 concurrence and analysis of this transportation project's impact under CEQA due to increases in vehicle miles traveled (VMT) attributable to the project will be necessary because the project is considered a capacity-increasing improvement of State Route 99. If those impacts are significant, Caltrans will need to consider mitigation or alternatives.

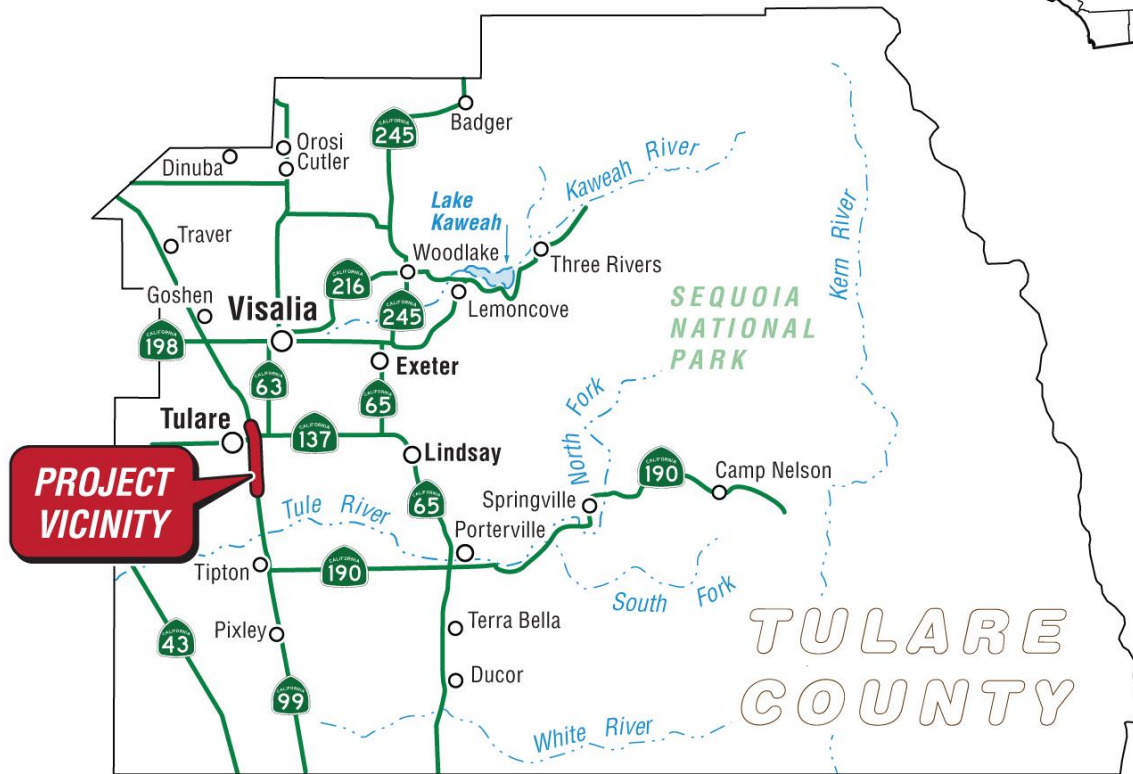
Environmental Justice

Potential environmental impacts to potential environmental justice communities that could be directly or indirectly affected by the project will also be considered.

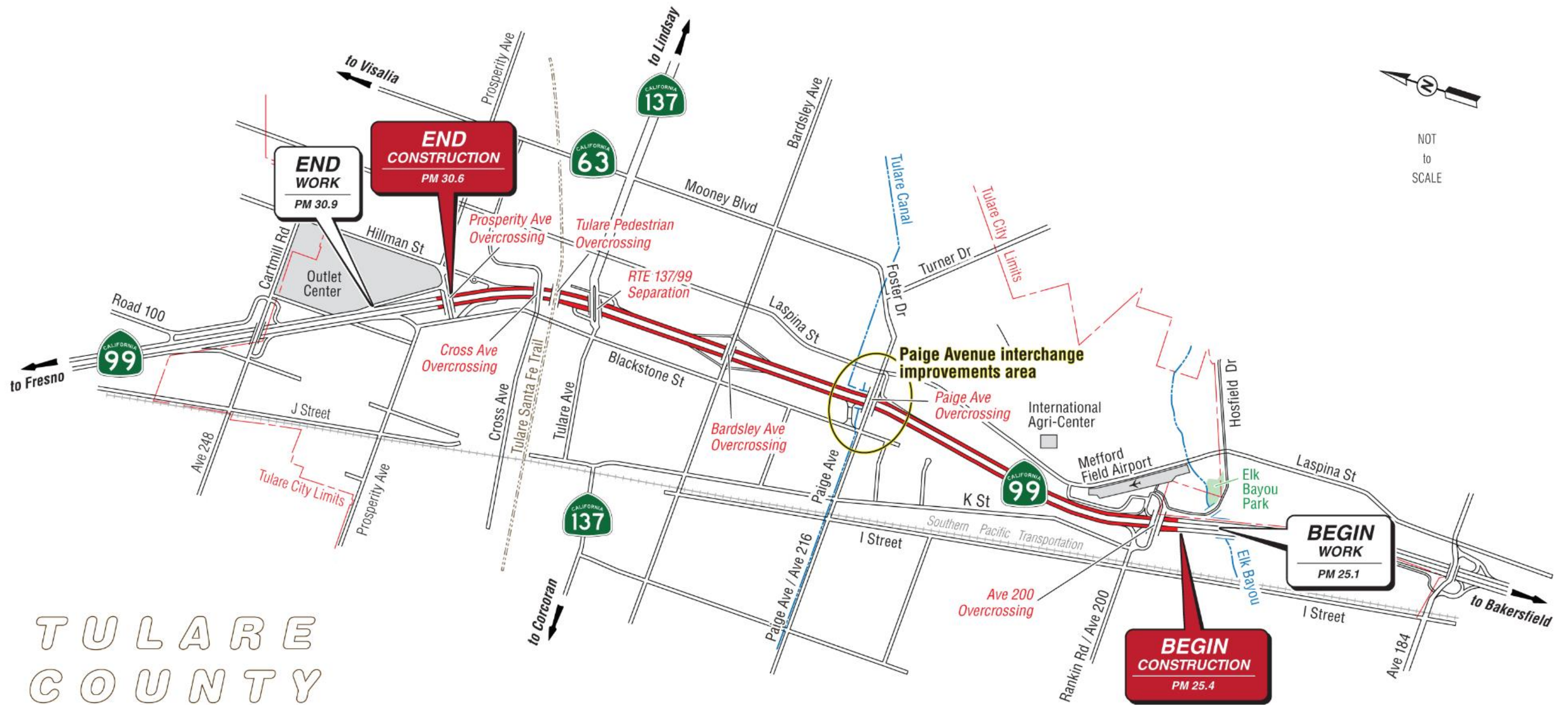
Project Vicinity Map



NOT
to
SCALE



Project Location Map



TULARE
COUNTY

Distribution List

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