

Notice of Preparation

Notice of Preparation

To: <u>State Clearinghouse</u>	From: <u>California Dept. of Transportation</u>
<u>1400 Tenth Street</u>	<u>50 Higuera Street</u>
<u>Sacramento, California 95814</u>	<u>San Luis Obispo, California 93401</u>
(Address)	(Address)

Subject: Notice of Preparation of a Draft Environmental Impact Report

The California Dept. of Transportation 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 Matt Fowler at the address shown above. We will need the name for a contact person in your agency.

Project Title: U.S. 101 South of Salinas Corridor Improvement Project

Project Applicant, if any: Transportation Agency for Monterey County

Date: 10/10/2024 Signature: 
Title: Senior Environmental Planner
Telephone: (805) 779-0793

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

Notice of Preparation of a Draft Environmental Impact Report for the U.S. 101 South of Salinas Corridor Improvement Project in Monterey County

The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), the lead agency, in partnership with the Transportation Agency for Monterey County (TAMC), is preparing a draft environmental impact report to address impacts associated with the proposed U.S. 101 South of Salinas Corridor Improvement Project in Monterey County, California. The document will be prepared pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

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 draft environmental impact report. An Initial Study has not been prepared for this project and, therefore, is not attached to this Notice of Preparation.

Project Location

The project is located along a 9-mile length of the U.S. Route 101 corridor between the unincorporated community and census-designated place of Chualar and the city of Salinas in Monterey County, California (from post miles 76.5 to 85.6). The project location is shown in Figure 1 below.

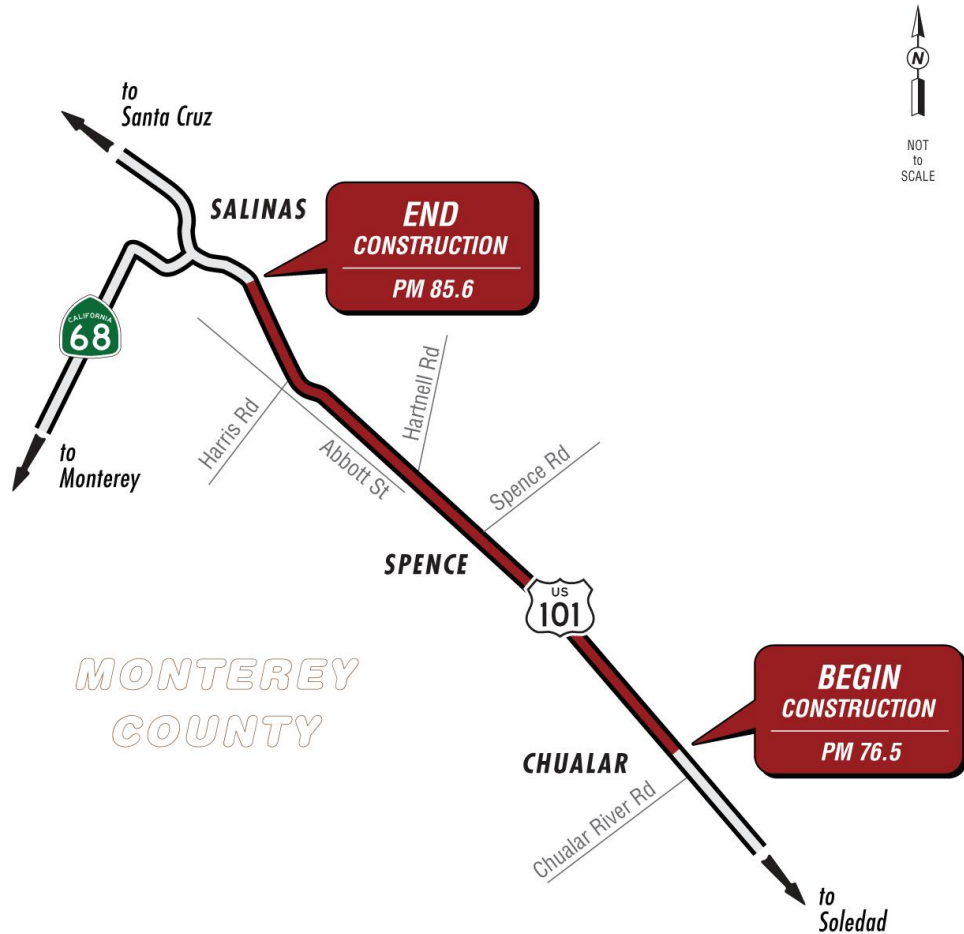
Purpose and Need

The purpose of this project is to reduce vehicle conflict points to enhance safety along U.S. Route 101 in a manner that maintains access to nearby land uses. The project goals are to:

- Address at-grade cross-median turning movements.
- Address at-grade railroad crossings.
- Provide safe and adequate circulation to nearby lands for all users.

Current safety and operational deficiencies require improving the existing transportation network to support local and interregional traffic. Within the project limits, gaps available for trucks and vehicles to make cross-median left turns across U.S. Route 101 at the at-grade intersections are often infrequent and short in duration.

Figure 1 Project Location Map



The proximity of U.S. Route 101 to the Union Pacific Railroad located to the west has added a dimension of conflict between trucks, rail, and farm equipment. Farm equipment crosses unsignalized railroad crossings and, at times, uses the unpaved areas between U.S. Route 101 and the railroad tracks. There are two signalized railroad crossings (one at Spence Road and the other at Somavia Road) and multiple unsignalized railroad crossings next to U.S. Route 101.

Direct property access points impact mobility on U.S. Route 101 through the Salinas Valley due to the speed differential of vehicles entering the highway and mainline traffic. In the Salinas Valley area, this poses a particular operational challenge for the large number of truck users who access the route at slower speeds. The conversion of expressway portions of the route to freeways through the implementation of access management strategies is warranted for the project corridor. Access management strategies that are

appropriate for this portion of U.S. Route 101 include interchange improvements, parallel local road development, and other operational improvements.

Project Description

The proposed project would improve safety and operations on the U.S. Route 101 corridor between Chualar and the city of Salinas. The project proposes modifications to the existing corridor that would include new relocated interchanges, modified access control, new local roads, and modifications to existing road networks.

The project would include the following improvements:

- Construction of new interchanges north of Chualar and Abbott Road.
- Modification of access control within the project limits.
- Construction of new local roads connecting new interchanges.

The project would require work outside the existing state right-of-way and would require new permanent right-of-way and temporary construction easements. The project would also require coordination with railroad owners to remove at-grade railroad crossings in order to construct new interchanges. Utilities in conflict with the project would need to be permanently relocated, while utilities in conflict with construction would require temporary relocation. The project would require earthwork and vegetation clearing. Complete streets features and improvements would be constructed at all new interchanges. Improvements to existing road networks where tie-ins with new roads are required would also occur.

Proposed Project Alternatives

Factors determining alternative project configurations include considerations of project objectives, traffic circulation, site suitability, availability of infrastructure, and a level of environmental impact. The draft environmental impact report will discuss the rationale for the selection of alternatives that are feasible and, therefore, merit in-depth consideration and alternatives that are infeasible (for example, failed to meet project objectives or did not avoid significant environmental effects) and, therefore, rejected. The Build Alternative details identified in this Notice of Preparation are general in nature. Further environmental resource analyses are necessary before more specific project design details can be identified. The need for project redesign would be determined during the environmental review.

Features Common to Both Build Alternatives

Both Build Alternatives would construct two new grade-separated interchanges with new local roads parallel to the existing U.S. Route 101 project corridor. The existing northbound and southbound U.S. Route 101 on- and off-ramps at Chualar (between post miles 76.6 and 77.3) would be removed. About 0.25 mile north of Chualar, a new grade-separated interchange would be constructed at post mile 77.6 to provide access to and from the highway and local streets. The existing northbound and southbound U.S. Route 101 on- and off-ramp at Abbott Street (post mile 82.3) would be removed. A new grade-separated interchange, about 1.5 miles north of the existing interchange, would be constructed at post mile 83.9 to provide access to and from the highway and Abbott Street.

The Build Alternatives would construct a new local road to the west and parallel to U.S. Route 101. This new local road would extend from Chualar River Road in Chualar to Abbott Street (from post miles 77.3 to 82.3). Within the project limits, both Build Alternatives would eliminate all direct access from local properties to the U.S. Route 101 project corridor from the west and direct vehicle traffic to the nearest interchange via local roads.

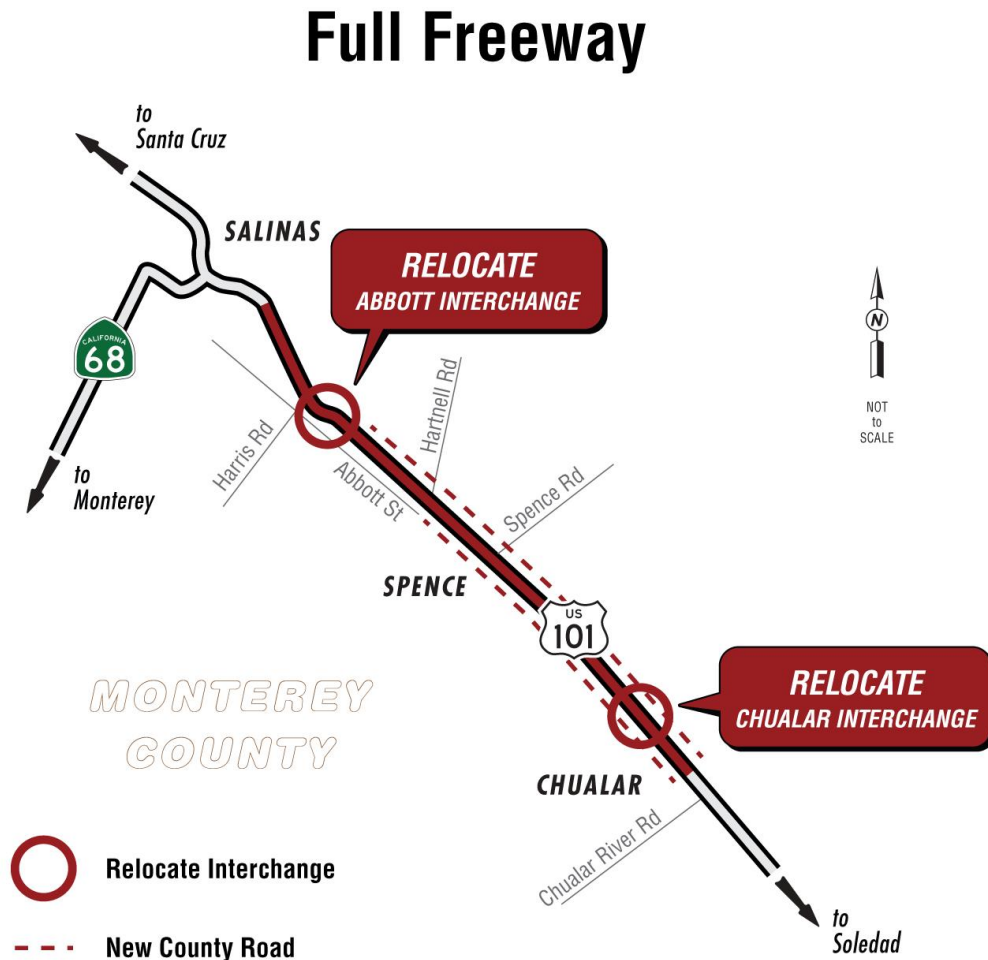
Both Build Alternatives would remove median access within the project limits to eliminate left-turn and U-turn vehicle movements along U.S. Route 101. Please note that a Caltrans Safety Project has also been initiated, and a median closure is expected in the near future. The timeline for the median closure will be determined in early 2025. Until the timeline for the Safety Project is established, the median closure scope will remain for this project.

Median access removal within the project limits would eliminate left-turn and U-turn vehicle movements along U.S. Route 101.

Build Alternative 1—Full Freeway

Build Alternative 1 would include all project features common to both Build Alternatives. This Build Alternative would construct a new local road along the east side of the project corridor. It would extend from Grant Street in Chualar to the new interchange at Abbott Street (from post miles 77.3 to 82.3). Build Alternative 1 would eliminate all direct access from local properties to the U.S. Route 101 project corridor from the east and direct vehicle traffic to the nearest interchange via local roads. Figure 2 shows the conceptual site plan for Build Alternative 1.

Figure 2 Conceptual Site Plan for Build Alternative 1

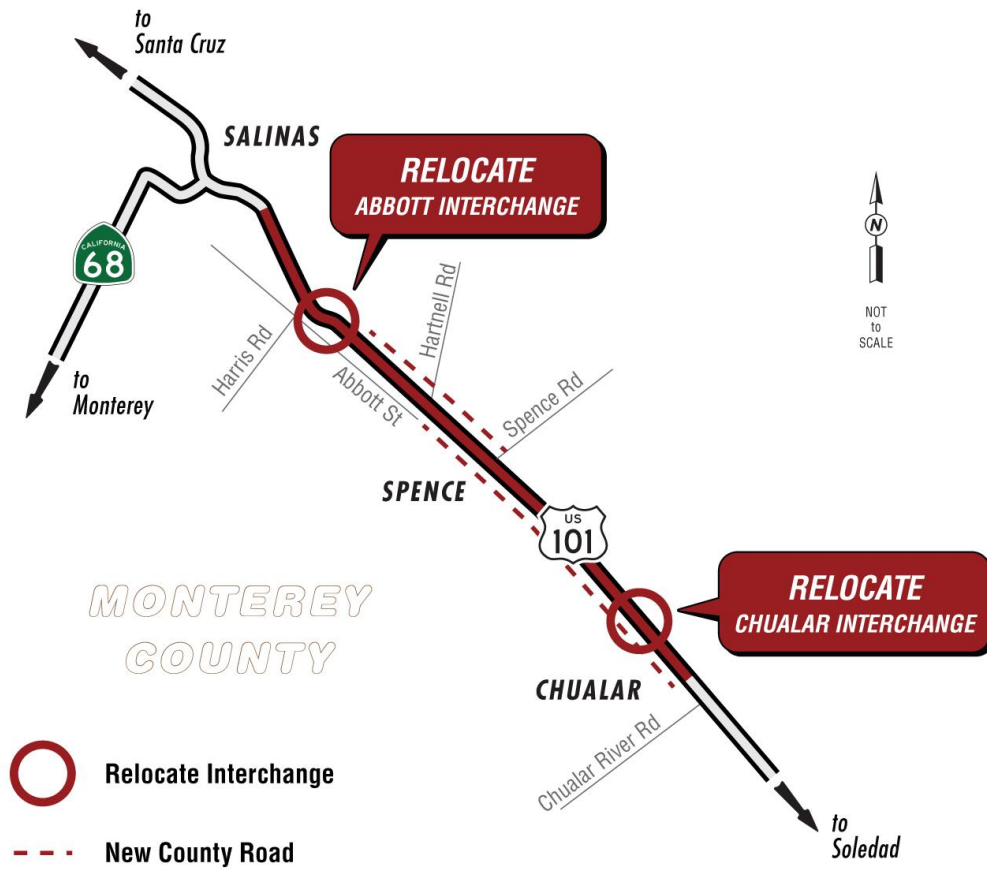


Build Alternative 2 – Hybrid Expressway/Freeway

Build Alternative 2 would include all project features common to both Build Alternatives. However, this Build Alternative would construct a new local road on the east side of the project corridor that will extend from Spence Road to the new interchange at Abbott Street (from post miles 77.3 to 82.3). Within the limits of the new local road on the east side, Build Alternative 2 would eliminate all direct access from local properties to the U.S. Route 101 project corridor from the east, including at Spence Road, and direct vehicle traffic to the nearest interchange via local roads. South of Spence Road to Chualar, the project would limit direct property access to right-in and right-out turn movements. Figure 3 shows the conceptual site plan for Build Alternative 2.

Figure 3 Conceptual Site Plan for Build Alternative 2

Hybrid Expressway/Freeway



No Build Alternative

This alternative would take no action. This alternative would not involve any construction, modifications, or alterations to existing conditions. The existing conditions would be left as is.

Potential Environmental Effects of the Project

Table 1 Potential Regulatory Permits and Approvals

Agency or Issue	Approval or Permit
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	Biological Opinion for California red-legged frog and steelhead trout.
National Marine Fisheries Service	Biological Opinion for steelhead trout.
California Department of Fish and Wildlife	Incidental Take Permit for California tiger salamander and steelhead trout.

Agriculture

The project site consists of prime farmland soils as classified by the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Important farmland soil types within the project site include Antioch very fine sandy loam, Cropley silty clay, Chualar loam, and Arroyo Seco gravelly loam. Antioch, with its very fine sandy loam soil, is considered a Farmland of Statewide Importance. Cropley silty clay, Chualar loam, and Arroyo Seco gravelly loam soils are considered Prime Farmland if irrigated. Potential impacts to farmlands and farmland operations will be evaluated in the draft environmental impact report.

Air Quality

The project may result in short-term construction-related and long-term operational air quality impacts on the local region and nearby sensitive receptors.

Biological Resources

The project is near highly disturbed agricultural land; upland habitat is likely of little value for listed species. However, potentially suitable habitats for the California red-legged frog, California tiger salamander, southwestern pond turtle, and steelhead trout may exist. Animal and plant surveys will be completed before the start of the draft environmental impact report.

Cultural and Historical Resources

The project vicinity is an area of moderate sensitivity for archeological resources and built environment historic resources. Therefore, there is potential for unknown prehistoric or historic archaeological deposits to occur within the project site. The project site will be studied, and impacts on cultural and historical resources will be further evaluated in the draft environmental impact report.

Energy

The project would use fossil fuels during construction and long-term operation. The project would follow all federal, state, and local regulations related to energy efficiency and use. While local plans, policies, and regulations do not apply to the state, assessments of the project's impact on air quality, greenhouse gas emissions, and transportation will be further evaluated in the draft environmental impact report.

Geology and Soils

Geotechnical and paleontological studies have not been completed and will be further evaluated in the draft environmental impact report.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Project construction would result in one-time emissions of greenhouse gases during construction. The permanent change in land use from agricultural practice to transportation use would also result in a one-time release of greenhouse gas emissions. The long-term operation of the project would result in annual greenhouse gas emissions from the direct combustion of fossil fuels.

Hazards and Hazardous Materials

Hazardous materials and waste that are routinely encountered or generated by highway construction projects and are expected to be issues for the proposed project include aerially deposited lead-contaminated soils, lead-containing paint, and asbestos-containing materials in buildings or structures to be demolished. Caltrans will perform a Preliminary Site Investigation to identify these materials and, if present, will ensure appropriate management and disposal during construction. There are several release sites for hazardous materials near the project. Caltrans intends to design the project to avoid disturbance of any existing contamination and will further evaluate potential impacts to these sites in the draft environmental impact report.

Hydrology and Water Quality

The confluences of the Salinas River, Chualar Creek, Quail Creek, and several unnamed creeks are to the west of the project site. The Salinas River flows north and parallel to the east of U.S. Route 101. Quail Creek and several unnamed creeks transect the project corridor. Alisal Creek lies to the east of U.S. Route 101 and flows north.

Multiple Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Flood Hazard Zones transect the U.S. Route 101 project corridor. A Location Hydraulic Study will be conducted to determine if the project would encroach upon any

designated floodplains. Potential impacts on floodplains will be further evaluated in the draft environmental impact report.

Land Use and Planning

The project site and surrounding lands are designated and zoned for a mix of agricultural, light industrial, commercial, and residential land uses according to the 2010 Monterey County General Plan. Potential project impacts that could conflict with existing land uses will be further evaluated in the draft environmental impact report.

Noise

Local noise levels in the vicinity of the project will inevitably experience a short-term increase due to construction activities. The project would involve new and realigned roadways that could result in new and increased noise impacts resulting from long-term operation; therefore, the project is considered a Type 1 project. Potential noise impacts resulting from the project will be evaluated, and the effectiveness of potential noise barriers will be analyzed in the draft environmental impact report.

Public Services

The project could cause an increase in on-site infrastructure and personnel (employees) during construction and long-term operation. The draft environmental impact report will further evaluate the project's impacts on public services, including but not limited to fire protection, police protection, nearby schools, nearby parks, and other public facilities.

Transportation (Vehicle Miles Traveled)

The project would construct new roads and new traffic control(s) on public roads. Traffic impacts related to these project components will be further evaluated in the draft environmental impact report. Senate Bill 743's concurrence and analysis of this transportation project's impact under CEQA regarding any potential increase in vehicle miles traveled attributable to the project will be necessary.

Utilities and Service Systems

The project may require the relocation of existing waterlines, wastewater lines, stormwater infrastructure, electricity and natural gas lines, and communication facilities. The project's potential conflicts with these utilities and service systems during construction and long-term operation will be further evaluated in the draft environmental impact report.

Wildfire

The project site is on land that is relatively flat and historically used for agricultural row crops. Surrounding areas around the project site consist of more agriculture, rural residences, and urbanization. The project is not within an area of fire risk, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection's (CalFire) Fire Hazard Severity Zone mapping and the County of Monterey Fire Protection Application. Fire protection services will be evaluated in the "Public Services" section of the draft environmental impact report.

Comments

Your input regarding the scope of the forthcoming draft environmental impact report, environmental factors potentially affected, and project alternatives must be submitted to Caltrans no later than 5:00 p.m. on Thursday, November 14, 2024.

Please provide written comments to:

California Department of Transportation, District 5

50 Higuera Street

San Luis Obispo, California 93401

Attention: Matt Fowler

or email:

matt.c.fowler@dot.ca.gov

Public Scoping Meetings

Two public scoping meetings are scheduled during the minimum 30-day public scoping period, which began with the release of this Notice of Preparation (NOP). The public scoping meetings are meant to provide an additional opportunity for public comment, identify public and agency concerns, and define issues that need to be examined in the draft environmental impact report. No decision(s) will be made on the project itself.

Meeting Details

Meeting 1 of 2

Date: Wednesday, October 23, 2024

Time: 4:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.

Where: Ag Center Conference Room, 1432 Abbott Street, Salinas, California 93901

Meeting 2 of 2 (Bilingual)

Date: Thursday, October 24, 2024

Time: 5:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.

Where: Chualar Union Elementary School Gymnasium, 24285 Lincoln Street, Chualar, California 93925