

Memorandum

To: CHAIR AND COMMISSIONERS
CALIFORNIA TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION

CTC Meeting: October 26-27, 2011

Reference No.: 2.2c.(2)
Action Item

From: NORMA ORTEGA
Chief Financial Officer

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Environmental Analysis

Subject: **APPROVAL OF PROJECT FOR CONSIDERATION OF FUNDING**

RECOMMENDATION:

The California Department of Transportation (Department) recommends that the California Transportation Commission (Commission), as a responsible agency, approve the attached Resolutions E-11-76.

ISSUE:

05-SBT-156, PM 3.0/R8.2 **RESOLUTION E-11-76**

The attached resolution proposes to approve for consideration of funding the following project for which a Final Environmental Impact Report (FEIR) has been completed:

- Route 156 in San Benito County. Roadway improvements including widening to four lanes of a portion of Route 156 near the city of Hollister. (PPNO 0297)

This project in San Benito County will widen State Route 156 from a two-lane conventional highway to a four-lane expressway on new alignment from the Alameda in San Juan Bautista to just east of Fourth Street. The project is programmed in the 2010 State Transportation Improvement Program and includes local funds. Total estimated project cost is \$69,961,000 for capital and support. The scope as described for the preferred alternative is consistent with the project scope programmed by the Commission in the 2010 State Transportation Improvement Program.

A copy of the FEIR has been provided to Commission staff. Resources that may be impacted by the project include; noise, biological resources, hydrology and floodplains, and farmlands. Potential impacts associated with the project can all be mitigated to below significance through proposed mitigation measures with the exception of farmlands. The proposed improvements, with all recommended mitigation measures, would still have significant adverse impacts to farmlands in San Benito County with 127 acres of prime farmland being converted to non-agricultural purposes. As a result, a Final Environmental Impact Report was prepared for the project.

Attachments

CALIFORNIA TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION

Resolution for Future Consideration of Funding

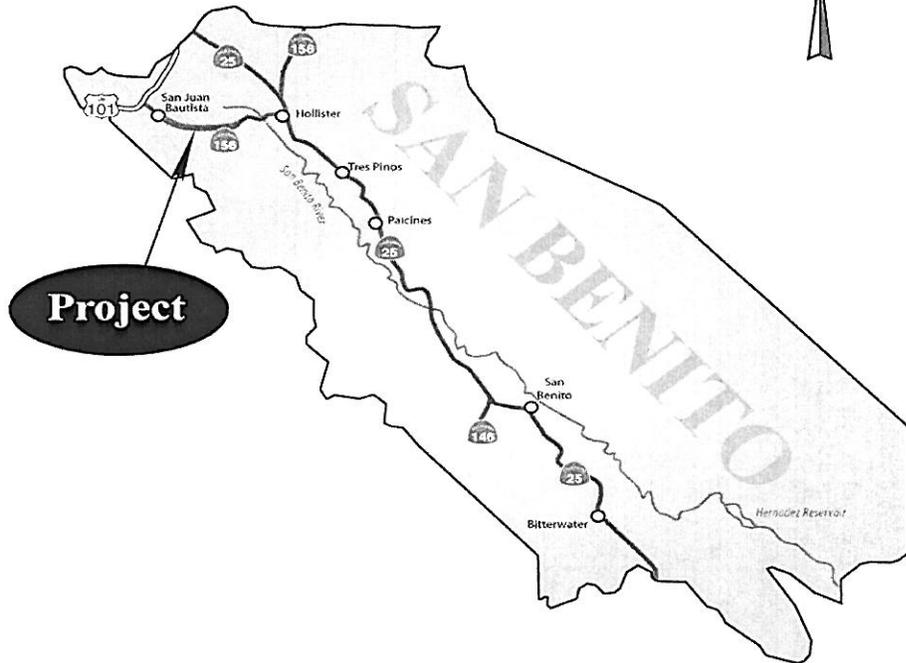
05-SBT-156, PM 3.0/R8.2

Resolution E-11-76

- 1.1** **WHEREAS**, the California Department of Transportation (Department) has completed an Environmental Impact Report pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and the CEQA Guidelines for the following project:
- Route 156 in San Benito County. Roadway improvements including widening to four lanes of a portion of Route 156 near the city of Hollister. (PPNO 0297)
- 1.2** **WHEREAS**, the Department has certified that the Environmental Impact Report has been completed pursuant to CEQA and the State CEQA Guidelines for its implementation; and
- 1.3** **WHEREAS**, the California Transportation Commission, as a responsible agency, has considered the information contained in the Environmental Impact Report; and
- 1.4** **WHEREAS**, the Environmental Impact Report did identify significant effects after mitigation; and
- 1.5** **WHEREAS**, a Statement of Overriding Considerations was prepared; and
- 1.6** **WHEREAS**, Findings were made pursuant to the State CEQA Guidelines.
- 2.1** **NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** that the California Transportation Commission does hereby support approval of the above referenced project to allow for consideration of funding.

Project Vicinity Map

State Route 156



Not to Scale



ram0206

FINDINGS

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION FINDINGS FOR

THE SAN BENITO ROUTE 156 IMPROVEMENT PROJECT, WHICH PROPOSES TO WIDEN STATE ROUTE 156 FROM THE ALAMEDA IN SAN JUAN BAUTISTA TO 0.2 MILE EAST OF FOURTH STREET (BUSINESS ROUTE 156) IN SAN BENITO COUNTY.

The following information is presented to comply with State CEQA Guidelines (Title 14 California Code of Regulations, Chapter 3, Section 15091) and the Department of Transportation and California Transportation Commission Environmental Regulations (Title 21, California Code of Regulations, Chapter 11, Section 1501). Reference is made to the Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Report (FSEIR) and the unaffected portions of the 2008 Final Environmental Impact Report (FEIR) for the project, which is the basic source for the information.

The following effects have been identified in the FSEIR and FEIR as resulting from the project. Effects found not to be significant have not been included.

Significant Impact to Farmland:

The project would require conversion of 124 acres of farmland. The 5.2-mile segment of SR156 proposed for widening travels through about 3.7 miles of prime farmland (with irrigation).

Findings:

Changes or alterations have been required in, or incorporated into, the project, which avoid or substantially lessen the significant environmental effect as identified in the final EIR.

Statement of Facts:

The project proposes widening 5.2 miles of State Route 156. This segment of the route currently travels through approximately 3.7 miles of prime farmland (with irrigation). The project cannot avoid farmland impacts; only the No-Build alternative would avoid farmland impacts. Farmland impacts are directly related to the amount of right of way needed for the project. Other alternatives considered to lessen farmland impacts were withdrawn because they either did not lessen environmental impacts or achieve the project's objectives.

Caltrans has reduced the project's farmland impacts from 145 acres to 124 acres by reducing the median to 46 feet and using the existing SR156 for a frontage road instead of acquiring new right of way. Caltrans will also negotiate parcel exchanges with neighboring land owners to reconfigure split parcels for resale or to continue farming operations. Caltrans' Relocation Advisory Assistance will be available for displacement of onsite investments, such as wells and irrigation systems. During construction, farmers will be provided property access easements, access to irrigation, and Caltrans will restore up to 18 inches of topsoil to temporarily disturbed farmland to mitigate temporary impacts.

In order to partially compensate for the acreage of farmland converted by the project, Caltrans will preserve farmland of roughly equal quality by purchasing a conservation easement(s) at an acre-to-acre ratio before construction of the project begins.

STATEMENT OF OVERRIDING CONSIDERATIONS

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION STATEMENT OF OVERRIDING CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE SAN BENITO ROUTE 156 IMPROVEMENT PROJECT, WHICH PROPOSES TO WIDEN STATE ROUTE 156 FROM THE ALAMEDA IN SAN JUAN BAUTISTA TO 0.2 MILE EAST OF FOURTH STREET (BUSINESS ROUTE 156) IN SAN BENITO COUNTY.

The following information is presented to comply with State CEQA Guidelines (Title 14 California Code of Regulations, Chapter 3, Section 15093, and the Department of Transportation and California Transportation Commission Environmental Regulations (Title 21 California Code of Regulations, Chapter 11, Section 1501). Reference is made to the Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Report (FEIR) and the unaffected portions of the 2008 Final Environmental Impact Report (FEIR) for the project, which is the basic source for the information.

The following impacts have been identified as significant and not fully mitigable:

- farmland impacts

Overriding considerations that support approval of this recommended project are as follows:

The purpose of the project is to improve route continuity, reduce congestion, and increase safety. The need for the proposed project is based on the following:

- A lack of continuous expressway on the route
- An increase in congestion

Additional safety concerns include:

- A history of flooding along the route
- A lack of passing opportunities on a two-lane conventional highway
- A non-standard compound curve at Union Road and Mitchell Road

San Benito County has been considered a bedroom community for the San Francisco Bay Area since about 1990. Its population, especially in the project area, has been growing rapidly due to the economic growth of the neighboring county of Santa Clara, which has created a need for more affordable housing. The population of San Benito County increased by 45.1 percent between the years 1990 and 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau). Most of the county's population growth was in or near the county's only incorporated cities, Hollister and San Juan Bautista. Hollister's population has more than doubled between 1976 and 1996. A building moratorium slowed down development in the early 2000's. Between 2003 and 2004, population growth in the county increased by only 1.4 percent. The moratorium was lifted at the end of 2008.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 48.5 percent of the county's workforce commutes to a workplace outside the county. The number of registered vehicles and registered drivers has also grown accordingly. This growth trend has increased demands on the regional transportation system. The primary purpose of State Route 156 is to serve interregional traffic but regional, local, and commuter trips dominate in Hollister.

State Route 156 is currently a two-lane conventional highway between The Alameda in San Juan Bautista (Post Mile 3.0) and its connection to the Hollister Bypass east of Union Road (Post Mile R8.2). The highway is designed to handle a maximum of 20,000 vehicles each day.

According to the Caltrans Historical Traffic Data, traffic volumes for the segment of State Route 156 between The Alameda in San Juan Bautista and Union Road (about 4 miles) has increased on an average from 14,000 vehicles in the year 1992, to 20,300 vehicles in the year 2000, to its current average volume of 26,200 vehicles. West of the project State Route 156 is a four-lane expressway and east of the project State Route 156 is a two-lane expressway. Construction of the project would create a continuous expressway of approximately 15 miles.

Agriculture is the primary industry of San Benito County, and this segment of State Route 156 extends through approximately 3.7 miles of prime farmland (with irrigation) in the San Juan Valley as it links the cities of Hollister and San Juan Bautista. However, San Benito County also offers many recreational facilities, such as historic San Juan Bautista, the Pinnacles National Monument, and the Hollister Hills State Vehicular Recreation Area. Local commuter traffic, commercial trucks and agricultural equipment associated with the farms in the San Juan Valley use this segment of the route, as well as tourists from the San Joaquin Valley traveling to coastal destinations.

Because the existing roadway is a conventional highway, access to driveways is not limited. This segment of State Route 156 has an estimated 45 private access roads or driveways, including pullout areas used by agricultural equipment, and 7 local road intersections. Traffic is often delayed by vehicles turning into and out of the numerous driveways and local roads.

This 5.2-mile two-lane highway includes approximately 4 miles of continuously straight roadway but offers little opportunity for passing. At peak hours traffic is heavy, resulting in congestion and conflicts between commuters and slower-moving agricultural traffic. Controlled access and an additional through-lane provided by the project would decrease the potential for traffic accidents, provide drivers with a larger recovery zone, improve traffic flow, and reduce congestion.

This segment of State Route 156 has a history of flooding. Several hydrology studies have been conducted by Caltrans and the San Benito County Water District. Although the agencies have different opinions as to why there is flooding, both agencies agree that flooding is a concern within the project area. The project would elevate the current profile of the highway and provide drainage systems for storm water runoff. The elevated roadway and additional drainage capacity would prevent driving hazards such as pooling and flooding.

The curve at the intersection of State Route 156, Union Road and Mitchell Road is considered a compound curve, or a curve with varying, or uneven, radii. Current Caltrans highway design standards avoid compound curves because drivers who have adjusted to the first curve could overcompensate on the second curve if it has a smaller radius than the first curve. By realigning a compound curve into one consistent curve, the frequency and severity of collisions will be reduced.

PROJECT ALTERNATIVES

Ten Build Alternatives were developed and studied by the Project Development Team (comprised of Caltrans personnel from different functional branches, local and state agency representatives, and other stakeholders). Seven of these alternatives were rejected because they did not reduce environmental impacts or they were not feasible to construct. Four alternatives, including the No Build Alternative, were considered in the environmental documents.

Alternative 2 would construct a four-lane divided expressway south of the existing State Route 156 with a frontage road north and south of the expressway.

Alternative 4A would construct a four-lane conventional highway/expressway south of the existing State Route 156 with portions of the existing State Route 156 used for westbound traffic from The Alameda in San Juan Bautista to Mission Vineyard Road, and from Union Road to the end of the project.

Alternative 6 would construct a four-lane expressway south of the existing State Route 156 with a frontage road north of the new alignment. This alternative proposes to use the existing State Route 156 in place as a frontage road.

PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

Due to public comments received during the two public hearings for the draft environmental document, Alternative 6 was modified to provide a safer route for emergency response vehicles. The modified Alternative 6 was chosen as the preferred alternative based on engineering and environmental analysis, and community and agency input. While all the build alternatives would meet the purpose and need of the project, Alternative 6 requires no residential relocations, minimal relocation of utilities, reduces the amount of farmland converted, and minimizes the disruption of traffic during construction. It also provides a safer route for pedestrians, bicyclists, and school transportation by providing a frontage road and removing this type of traffic from the expressway, while maintaining the existing northern residential access (driveways) for property owners.

The No Build Alternative would offer no relief from congestion nor provide for future traffic needs, would not improve safety or route continuity, would not correct the non-standard compound curve, and would not improve highway drainage or provide relief from flooding.

CONCLUSION

Farmland impacts cannot be avoided but with the mitigation measures adopted, the impact has been substantially lessened. Caltrans has incorporated design changes that have reduced farmland conversion from 145 acres to 124 acres, including reducing the median from 62 feet to 46 feet. Caltrans intends to establish a conservation easement near the project but if negotiations are not successful locally, Caltrans will establish a conservation easement elsewhere in California. With the use of conservation easements, along with the mitigation measures already incorporated into the project design, Caltrans would partially compensate the direct loss of agricultural land and will protect a portion of California's remaining land resources in accordance with California Environmental Quality Act Guideline 15370.

