

December 14th, 2021



Protecting Marin Since 1934

Yolanda Rivas
Caltrans District 4 Environmental
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MS 8B
Oakland, CA 94623

Via email: yolanda.rivas@dot.ca.gov
SR37FloodProject@dot.ca.gov

Re: Notice of Preparation (NOP) of Draft EIR for SR 37 Flood Reduction Project from US 101 to SR 121

Dear Ms. Rivas:

Marin Conservation League (MCL) has been following the State Route 37 (SR 37) long-range vision and corridor planning as well as recent implementation of wetland restoration projects and interim transportation infrastructure improvements. As a conservation organization with an 87-year history and mission to preserve, protect and enhance the natural assets of Marin County, we support seeking not only the prevention of environmental degradation but also environmental enhancement and restoration opportunities during improvements along the corridor. In response to the November 17 Scoping Meeting presentation on the proposed SR 37 Flood Reduction Project from US 101 to SR 121 (Project), MCL offers the following comments.

Based on information presented at the Scoping Meeting, the stated Purpose of the Project is to “Reduce highway flooding by raising about 5-miles of roadway to 12 to 14 feet in elevation and designing the roadway to withstand the 25-year flood event and anticipated effects of sea level rise from now until mid-century, when longer term solution for addressing sea level rise along the entire corridor is expected to be constructed.” MCL believes that stating a proposed solution to the Project, “by raising about 5-miles of roadway to 12 to 14 feet in elevation”, is inappropriate in a Purpose statement in that it unnecessarily limits the scope of potential alternatives. At a minimum, that phrase should be eliminated from the Project Purpose.

Though the Project is focused on near term flood reduction, according to the timeline presented, the interim Project would not begin construction until 2027. The Project is but one among many, small and large, along the SR 37 Corridor and we feel it must align with long range planning for all three segments to ensure that the corridor-wide vision guides design and long-term adaptation planning to the risks posed to the highway by rising sea levels driven by climate change.

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Marin Conservation League was founded in 1934 to preserve, protect and enhance the natural assets of Marin County.

In a May 18, 2018 letter regarding SR 37 design alternatives guidance addressed to Caltrans, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) and the Highway 37 Policy Committee, the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board (RWQCB) stated, “Elevating SR 37 on a fill embankment along all, or a portion, of the corridor will likely result in significant direct fill impacts to San Pablo Bay and surrounding wetlands and potentially significant indirect impacts to the physical and ecological processes that support these habitats. Raising SR 37 on a causeway would be more likely to allow for San Pablo Bay and the sensitive habitats surrounding SR 37 to more effectively adapt to future SLR.”

Similarly, an August 9, 2021 RWQCB letter to Caltrans stated, “We have repeatedly ... emphasized to Caltrans our preference that as much of SR 37 as practicable be rebuilt on a causeway, both to minimize direct impacts to waters of the State (including wetlands) from dredge and fill activities, as well as the indirect impacts that stem from the highway’s influence on regional and site-scale hydrologic and geomorphic processes that support current and future beneficial uses of the region’s waters.”

The letter also raises concerns regarding information raised during geotechnical studies conducted for MTC’s SR 37 Ultimate SLR Design Alternatives Assessment (DAA) for the same stretch between US 101 and SR 121. It states, “The Project Team has recently presented new information describing the need for deep soil mixing underneath much of the embankment to support the added weight of the roadway and fill, which underscores the many challenges facing implementation of the embankment alternative. We are especially concerned about the potential impacts of deep soil mixing on the region’s groundwater resources and sediment transport processes, and how that may impact surface waters ... From the preliminary cost estimates ... it appears that incorporation of deep soil mixing into the embankment alternative renders its cost per linear foot of roadway roughly equivalent to that of the causeway alternative ... We strongly urge Caltrans to focus its resources on developing the causeway alternative and maximizing its use as much as practicable between US 101 and I-80.”

MCL wholeheartedly agrees. The State and other entities will invest considerable public funds in modifying SR 37 over time. MCL believes each modification should be planned to build toward ensuring protection against anticipated sea level rise to meet the long-range RWQCB recommendations of planning protection for H++ SLR projection levels and to reduce the likelihood of ongoing SLR-related maintenance. In addition, each modification should integrate and promote beneficial uses and natural SLR adaptation strategies for San Pablo Bay, the tidal creeks flowing under SR 37, and the marsh and wetland habitats along the corridor and in adjacent watersheds that support migratory and resident species.

In this limited time of unprecedented federal and state funding availability for investment in both transportation infrastructure improvements and climate change resilience, it is imperative that all state, regional and local agencies move in the same direction, investing public funds responsibly in multi-benefit solutions that progressively build toward long-term resiliency. Accelerating now the planning processes and implementation of long-term solutions makes the best use of these public

investments. **We request that Caltrans invest in accelerating the DAA planning and implementation process, evaluating alternatives that include those with causeways that allow for the free movement of water, sediment and wildlife, instead of pursuing the proposed flood reduction planning efforts to elevate the embankments between US 101 and SR 121 in 2027.**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,



Robert Miller
President



Kate Powers
Land Use, Transportation, and Water Committee

cc: Damon Connolly, Marin County Supervisor, MTC Commissioner, SR 37 Policy Committee
Judy Arnold, Marin County Supervisor, SR 37 Policy Committee
Stephanie Moulton-Peters, Marin County Supervisor, BCDC Commissioner
Dennis Rodoni, Marin County Supervisor
Katie Rice, Marin County Supervisor
Eric Lucan, Novato Councilmember, TAM Board Chair, SR 37 Policy Committee
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Anne Richman, Transportation Authority of Marin Executive Director