

RIVERSIDE COUNTY TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION	
DATE:	July 8, 2009
TO:	Riverside County Transportation Commission
FROM:	Mid County Parkway Ad Hoc Committee Cathy Bechtel, Project Development Director Gustavo Quintero, Bechtel Project Coordinator
THROUGH:	Anne Mayer, Executive Director
SUBJECT:	Mid County Parkway: Environmental Impact Report/ Environmental Impact Statement

MID COUNTY PARKWAY AD HOC COMMITTEE AND STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

This item is for the Commission to:

- 1) Focus the Mid County Parkway (MCP) project limits to Interstate 215 and State Route 79 in response to comments received on the draft environmental impact report/environmental impact statement (EIR/EIS);
- 2) Maintain a long-term plan for a future east-west CETAP corridor between I-215 and I-15;
- 3) Prioritize up to \$7 million in Regional Arterial, Transportation Uniform Mitigation Fee, or federal funds to the county of Riverside (County) for the preparation of the environmental document for the Cajalco Road widening;
- 4) Consider reinitiation of the Community and Environmental Transportation Acceptability Process (CETAP) corridor analysis between the I-215 and I-15 if the County's Cajalco Road project is not environmentally cleared by 2013;
- 5) Prepare a phasing plan for the MCP, east of I-215, and support the County's efforts to prepare a phasing for Cajalco Road, between I-215 and I-15, that ensures equity in the funding and capacity improvements on each project; and
- 6) Reconsider funding priorities for east-west regional arterials as part of the Commission's Measure A Regional Arterial Program, once the economy improves.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS:

Action on this item was considered by the Commission at the June 10, 2009 meeting. The city of Riverside (City) expressed concerns about traffic related impacts that could result from this modification and requested a delay in action to allow time for further discussion. Many of the concerns raised by the City focused on ensuring the County's success with improvements to Cajalco Road to allow

increased traffic capacity. Additionally, the City wanted assurance that improvements to the SR-91/I-15 interchange would be in place prior to any construction of the modified MCP.

On June 15, 2009, a meeting was held with the City to discuss the Mid County Parkway project and proposed changes. Representatives from the County were also present to share its planned improvements to Cajalco Road. A letter was sent to the City directly following the meeting to outline Commission staff's commitment to work with the City as the project moves forward (Attachment 1).

At the Commission meeting, members also commented on the important role east-west arterials will play in local circulation as a result of a modified Mid County Parkway. Should the Commission approve the recommendation to have the project's western terminus be at I-215, a new traffic report will be completed to evaluate the traffic impacts to surrounding areas and identify required mitigation. Additionally, the County is proceeding with plans to improve Cajalco Road. The County has already initiated environmental work for the section between I-215 and Wood Road with construction anticipated to begin in FY 2011/12. Preliminary planning has also begun for the section from Wood Road to Temescal Canyon Road. The County's planned improvements to widen Cajalco Road will provide significant traffic benefit at a much lower cost, estimated at \$200 million.

Given the current financial situation, focusing the Commission's regional project on the eastern segment and supporting the County's efforts to improve Cajalco Road on the western segment will allow the Commission to make the best use of limited transportation funds while addressing the most immediate traffic and safety needs.

At the MCP Ad Hoc Committee held on June 29, 2009, the City stated its support for the modification of the MCP as recommended, with the understanding that once the financial situation improves, reconsideration of east-west arterial improvements should be addressed (Attachment 2). Commissioners also directed staff to work cooperatively with the County and local jurisdictions on planned improvements to regional arterials, such as Ethanac Road, due to their significance in providing east-west circulation. Opportunity for evaluation and funding prioritization can be done through the Commission's Measure A Regional Arterial Program.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The draft EIR/EIS for the MCP project was circulated for public review on October 10, 2008, with the close of the public comment period on January 8, 2009, providing a 90-day comment period. During this time, six public

meetings/hearings were held: three public information meetings in late October 2008, two public hearings in November 2008 and a 1st District public meeting in December 2008. The Commission accepted public comments for the record at all of these meetings, along with comments via the website and email. Over 4,500 newsletters with comment cards were sent out in October 2008.

Over 3,100 comments received from:

- 50 public agencies and organizations;
- 10 large property owners;
- 240 individuals; and
- Form letter from over 1100 individuals nationwide.

Two key themes emerged in the public review comments:

- 1) Concern about the cost and timing of available funds for the project. Many comments noted that, given the current economy and difficulty in securing funding for the entire project, limited financial resources should be focused on areas of greatest need.
- 2) Although the public comments raised concerns about many aspects of the project throughout its entire length, many comments suggested that making improvements to existing facilities rather than building MCP would be a better expenditure of public funding in the western portion of the project area between I-15 and I-215. In this area, improving existing facilities such as Cajalco Road instead of building MCP would minimize impacts to the rural communities of Gavilan Hills and Lake Mathews Estates and minimize impacts to existing habitat reserves. Impacts to rural communities and existing habitat reserves were two major concerns raised during public comment.

To address these concerns, the Commission as the lead agency under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) as the lead agency under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and Caltrans as the liaison to FHWA in confirming compliance with all applicable NEPA requirements, have developed an approach for completing the EIR/EIS process for the project that would refine the project purpose statement and refine the project alternatives to focus on the transportation needs between I-215 to SR-79 (Attachment 3).

Under this approach, the MCP project purpose and need statement would be refined to establish I-215 as the western terminus of the project, with SR-79 remaining as the eastern terminus of the project. Such a refinement would still provide for logical termini and independent utility pursuant to FHWA requirements under 23 CFR 771.111 because:

- 1) The project would connect logical termini (a north-south Interstate highway and a north-south State highway) and be of sufficient length (16 miles) to address environmental matters on a broad scope.
- 2) The project would have independent utility as a usable and reasonable expenditure of funds even if no other transportation improvements were made in the area.
- 3) The project would not preclude the consideration of other, reasonably foreseeable future transportation improvements.

To address the refined project purpose statement, up to three modified build alternatives would be defined and evaluated that would consist of a parkway facility from I-215 to SR-79 (these modified alternatives would follow the alignments for original Alternatives 4, 5, and 9 east of I-215). While a revised notice of intent/notice of preparation (NOI/NOP) would not need to be issued for the modified project, the Commission would conduct additional public outreach, including public information meetings and notifications through the project website and direct mail, to notify the public of the changes in the project.

A recirculated draft EIR/supplemental draft EIS (RDEIR/SDEIS) evaluating the modified alternatives would be prepared and circulated with the appropriate notice of availability (NOA) and public review process (including public meetings to be held during recirculation). The RDEIR/SDEIS would also include discussions of the process to date and how the comments received during public review of the draft EIR/EIS led to a decision to refine the project purpose statement to focus on the area between I-215 and SR-79. Construction phasing plans would be developed for the modified build alternatives (I-215 to SR-79) to disclose the proposed project implementation to the public and how construction will be broken up into phases. In addition to including the analysis of up to three modified build alternatives and inclusion of a phasing plan and associated environmental analysis, the recirculated document would also be revised to address public comments received on the draft EIR/EIS. Following completion of public review of the recirculated document, a final EIR/EIS would be prepared.

As lead agency under CEQA, the Commission would consider certifying the final EIR, and then would consider approval of one of the modified build alternatives. The Commission would then be responsible for advancing future design, right-of-way, and construction phases for the parkway alternative from I-215 to SR-79. As lead agency under NEPA, FHWA would consider approval of the final EIS, and issuance of a record of decision (ROD) for one of the modified build alternatives.

Fundamental to the refinement of the project purpose statement and alternatives is that no improvements between I-15 and I-215 would be planned or analyzed as part of the MCP project. The Riverside County Transportation Department's

General Plan roadway improvements for Cajalco Road west of I-215 would be analyzed in the MCP cumulative impacts assessment using the most current information available from the county; however, the Cajalco Road improvement projects will be subject to separate environmental review processes in the future with the Riverside County Transportation Department acting as the lead agency.

The Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) and Regional Transportation Improvement Program (RTIP) will have to be modified to match the refocused project description. Additionally, given that projected travel demand west of I-215 still identifies a need for infrastructure improvements, even with the county's planned improvements to Cajalco Road, it is critical that a CETAP corridor between I-215 and I-15 remain in the RTP to not preclude consideration of future transportation improvements.

The refocusing of the project and preparation of the RDEIR/SDEIS and will require additional time and budget. Approximately 18 months will be added to the completion schedule (Attachment 4). Staff is currently working with the team to develop a revised scope of work. There is adequate budget to allow work to continue through the summer. Staff anticipates coming back to the Commission in the fall with a contract amendment to cover the revised scope.

CONCLUSION:

An environmental process is completed to assess potential impacts and to hear from the public. With this recommended action, the Commission is responding to feedback we received from the public to deliver a project that provides the greatest transportation benefits with the fewest possible impacts. Modifying the project will allow the Commission to move more quickly to provide improvements where the demand is greatest and avoid time-consuming delays tied to environmental constraints and community challenges affecting the portion of the original project west of I-215. This course of action will also result in improvements occurring more quickly west of I-215 with the County's Cajalco widening project, making the best use of limited transportation dollars while providing the most immediate traffic and safety benefits.

Attachments:

- 1) June 15, 2009 Letter to City of Riverside
- 2) June 29, 2009 Letter from City of Riverside
- 3) Refocused MCP Map
- 4) Schedule