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Disappointing Delay for Willits Bypass Construction

This week, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' San Francisco District office declined to issue a permit for Caltrans to construct a freeway bypass around Willits. All other required permits are in hand. \$126 million of federal and state construction funds for the project are contingent on permit approval, so the Corps' lack of action effectively halts the project.

The Corps took no action on Caltrans' application for the Clean Water Act Section 404 permit, leaving the door open to complete a remaining checklist of requirements. The mitigation plan proposed by Caltrans District 1 needs a full annual biological cycle to complete existing conditions studies of the habitat mitigation sites in Little Lake Valley. Partly due to delays in identifying and acquiring over 2,000 acres of suitable real estate, this was not done in time to meet the funding deadline. Caltrans' District Director Charles Fielder has stated his intention to continue advancing the project.

Phil Dow, MCOG's Executive Director, sees three possible scenarios. The best case would entail the California Transportation Commission (CTC) approving a time extension to complete the studies and reapply for funds, delaying construction until mid-2012 if successful. The next best case would be that the bypass funds are reallocated, delaying construction five or six more years. In the worst scenario, Caltrans would not be able to obtain the necessary permit, or else the CTC would decide to redirect the funding elsewhere, in which case "the project would be truly dead." Dow said, "There have been a lot of resources already directed toward this project, so I hope this will not be the case."

Environmental approvals, design and specifications, partnerships, financing, public support and political will all must coincide for a project of this scale to move forward. The US-101

Bypass of Willits has involved decades of planning, a 14-year environmental review process, millions of taxpayer dollars, and countless days of time and effort by all concerned. Each step has brought the project closer to fruition. A crucial window of opportunity has now closed, when federal funds were available to California with no other eligible projects competing for the money.

If constructed, the bypass is expected to relieve traffic congestion on the 101 corridor through Willits and the region, improve circulation for the surrounding populated areas, reduce toxic and particulate pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, improve public health and safety, and enhance opportunities for bicycle and pedestrian transportation.

In the current depressed economy, construction contractors and labor unions have been counting on the project. Work on the bypass would create hundreds of local jobs.

On June 30, the CTC had approved by unanimous vote the allocation of \$126.2 million of construction funds conditional upon Caltrans obtaining all necessary environmental permits from federal resource agencies by August 31. Funds must be encumbered before the federal fiscal year ends in September.

The funding allocation includes \$17.3 million programmed by MCOG in 1998 from its regional share of state highway capital improvement funds. Additionally, \$14 million of regional funds programmed by MCOG already have been expended on right-of-way acquisition. The bypass has been MCOG's highest priority highway project for decades.

Acting as the Regional Transportation Planning Agency, MCOG programs or allocates various types of state and federal transportation funds to partners including Caltrans, the County of Mendocino and the four incorporated Cities of Ukiah, Fort Bragg, Willits, and Point Arena. In addition to projects on state highways and within its five member jurisdictions, MCOG helps support multi-modal transportation activities of the Mendocino Transit Authority, North Coast Rail Authority, local airports, and others. Projects involve planning, capital improvements, rehabilitation and maintenance, transit infrastructure and fleet replacement. For more information, call the MCOG office at 463-1859 or consult the agency's web site at www.mendocinocog.org.

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