



MENDOCINO
COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

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May 10, 2007

Mr. Will Kempton, Director
California Department of Transportation
1120 N Street
P.O. Box 942873
Sacramento, CA 94273-0001

Dear Mr. Kempton:

The Mendocino Council of Governments (MCOG) met on May 7, 2007, and had its first opportunity to discuss the Caltrans/CTC proposal for a staged improvement of the U.S. 101 bypass of Willits. Our full Board of Directors consists of representatives from all four incorporated cities as well as county-wide elected officials. Only our Willits representative, Mayor Jorgensen, and District 3 Supervisor Pinches had the opportunity to meet with Caltrans and the commissioners at the April 4, 2007 meeting in Willits.

Residents of the Little Lake Valley have been waiting for traffic relief from a proposed bypass for over 50 years. In the time period between the beginning of the project's environmental phase and its conclusion last December, traffic congestion has noticeably deteriorated. Clearly, the public wants relief from through traffic and the small community of Willits wants its streets back.

Mendocino Council of Governments appreciates the effort made by Caltrans and the California Transportation Commission to travel to Willits and discuss options for phasing this project. Since the Board remains convinced that a full four-lane freeway is the only option that will provide a safe and efficient facility along the selected alignment, we wish to convey to you the following concerns/comments regarding a phased bypass project:

1. Since the Purpose & Need for the bypass indicates that only a four-lane freeway will provide an acceptable level of service throughout the life of the project, Caltrans is encouraged to work with MCOG to develop a funding plan to guide the funding partners toward successful completion of the final phase. There needs to be some type of road map that will lead both partners, in a logical manner, from the first phase to the final phase.

2. The Project Manager for the bypass presented two design options at the April 4, 2007 meeting. One option would result in an at-grade intersection near the northern end of the project. The second option would provide a full (albeit 2-lane) interchange at this location. The proposed bypass has the potential of eliminating all traffic signals between San Francisco and Eureka. An at-grade intersection is inconsistent with efforts to improve safety and operations on U.S. 101. MCOG considers an at-grade intersection to be unacceptable and inappropriate because of safety and operational concerns over constructing another signalized intersection on the Principal Arterial corridor.
3. As a rural county, our residents are constantly exposed to the inherent hazards of travel on two-lane highways. Although MCOG has strongly supported elimination of two-lane segments of U.S. 101, we do recognize that construction phasing with an initial two-lane facility may be our only option at this point. The proposed facility will separate through traffic from local traffic in Willits but will result in an unhealthy mix of large trucks, motor homes, vehicles towing trailers, and passenger cars vying for position on relatively flat ground. Mendocino Council of Governments believes that construction of the initial two-lane phase without an adequate median or median barrier is hazardous, inappropriate, and unacceptable.
4. Construction of the full project in a timely manner remains the most appropriate and cost effective approach to this project. A phased project that does not provide adequately for the future is exactly the type of “band-aid” approach to solving problems that CTC Chairman Ghielmetti argued against at the Northern California STIP Hearing in reference to State Route 152 in Los Banos.
5. MCOG has already requested that the CTC develop a back-up list of CMIA projects consisting of eligible projects that can meet legislatively imposed deadlines for construction, but were not approved by the CTC in February. Assemblymember Berg has also made this request on our behalf. Since over one-third of the approved CMIA projects have a benefit/cost ratio lower than the U.S. 101 bypass of Willits, MCOG is soliciting Caltrans support of future CMIA funding should there be casualties to the approved program and a need arises to commit funding to eligible projects.
6. MCOG has been a faithful partner with Caltrans in the effort to build the full facility. Toward that end, we over-programmed in the 2006 STIP to fully fund the right-of-way activities. The phased approach to this project that has been proposed falls far short of the needs and our expectations. This is not the project we were committing to when these dollars were programmed last year. The expectations now are that funding will be identified in the 2006 STIP Augmentation to permit the phased project to proceed. If this is not the case, Caltrans should be prepared to shoulder further cost increases that may result from additional delays for this long overdue, highly needed, and construction-ready project.

Mendocino Council of Governments appreciates your effort to find a solution to keep this project moving. Your willingness to come to Willits and meet with elected officials, community leaders, and local residents was very positive and welcome. Please consider our concerns expressed herein in the vein that we believe we are, and have been, full partners in the effort to improve the highway transportation system for all Californians.

Sincerely,

/s/

Phillip J. Dow, P.E.
Executive Director

Cc: Marsha Wharff, MCOG Chair
Senator Pat Wiggins, District 2
Assemblywoman Patty Berg, District 1
James Ghielmetti, Chair, CTC