

#9 Two-Lane Bypass Proposal

Several years ago it was proposed that an option should be considered to provide a two-lane bypass instead of a standard four-lane facility for the U.S. 101 bypass of Willits. The thinking was that since the route will likely traverse sensitive wetlands areas, the impacts should be minimized by reducing the “footprint” of the project. Looking at volume of through traffic expected on the completed facility, it was assumed that a two-lane facility could provide adequate service well into the future.

The option of providing a two-lane bypass was considered and rejected. It does not meet the “Purpose and Need” of the project. A two-lane facility will not provide for Level of Service C operations. There is documentation in the final EIS/EIR that a two-lane facility will operate at a Level of Service D.

U.S. 101 is both a federal and state highway. The American Association of State Highway Transportation Officials (AASHTO) recommends that highways in rural areas be developed to function at Level of Service B or C. Level of Service D is not recommended anywhere, but may be accepted in highly congested urban areas. It is unrealistic to expect the investment of million of dollars of federal and state funding for a project that does not meet the standards for a major highway.

Recently Caltrans completed a study that examined the bypass in terms of what could be built and the costs involved. It found that there is not enough construction funding available to build any project. **It continues to recommend the full 4-lane facility because that is the only type of facility that will guarantee the Purpose and Need of the project is met.** In the event that full funding is not available, it recommends a two-lane interim project (Option C) that may be constructed until followed up with a second construction phase. **The two-lane Option C project is a construction phase and not intended to be a permanent facility.**

Recently, two-lane proponents have called attention to a “Value Analysis Alternative” report prepared in 1999 by TVI International for support. That report clearly justifies the two-lane cause. However, like many interim reports produced in this long process, the assumptions have been proven to be wrong due to information and constraints encountered through the process.

First, this “value analysis” is merely a brainstorming exercise. It was “assumed” that a Level of Service of C could be obtained, based solely of through traffic projections and the Alternative Concept. The “Alternative Concept” selected to reach these conclusions clearly states “Construct a 2-lane expressway facility through the valley and buy right-of-way for a 4-lane freeway. Intersections will be at-grade. Passing lanes will be provided.”

This project will not have at-grade intersections. Provision of passing lanes poses particular problems for this project (note the six “P” words in a sentence).

The Modified J1T alignment was carefully selected to minimize impacts on resources and to avoid key facilities in the Little Lake Valley. In doing so, a bridge will be provided over a creek, over East Hill Road, and over the railroad tracks at the north end of the project. A long viaduct will be constructed over key wetlands areas that also cross over Center Valley Road and Hearst-Willits Road (Commercial Street). There will be a full interchange at both the south end and north end of the project. There will be no at-grade intersections on this project.

Passing lanes have not been considered on this project for quite some time. Once it became apparent that the two-lane proposal would not provide sufficient service and those wetlands concerns would tightly constrain our options, project design concentrated on reducing the impacts of a four-lane facility.

Passing lanes require a considerable amount of transitioning to safely separate the movements and a considerable minimum length to be safe and effective. Distances between structures and the curvature built into the preferred alignment would make it difficult to build effective passing lanes on the adopted alignment.