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Federal Highway Administration – California Division  
650 Capitol Mall, Ste 4 – 100  
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Attention: Lanh Phan, Transportation Engineer

August 21, 2009

**Re: FEIR/FEIS Marin-Sonoma Narrows HOV Widening Project**

SCH #2001042115  
FHWA-CA-EIS-07-01-D  
04-MRN-101-KP 30.0/44.5 (PM 18.6/27.7)  
04-SON-101KP 0.0/11.5 (PM 0.0/7.1) EA 264000

Dear Lanh Phan:

The Sierra Club Marin Group, on behalf of its approximate 5,000 members, would like to respond to the FEIR/FEIS documents regarding the Marin-Sonoma Narrows (MSN) HOV Widening Project.

We are pleased to see Caltrans FEIR/FEIS for the MSN has chosen Alternative 12b as the Preferred Alternative for the Central Segment (B) of the project. We too believe this should be the Preferred Alternative.

After reading, discussing and deliberating the responses and information presented in the FEIR/FEIS documents, we find as presented, we are unable to support this project. Without meaningful design exceptions and modifications to reduce the impacts to the environment, the project will create significant impacts which we believe are not adequately mitigated as described in the documents.

The primary needs and purpose for this project as stated in the FEIR/FEIS, is to reduce congestion (improve traffic flow) along U.S. 101. This is a worthy purpose, but we strongly believe this can be achieved at the same time as allowing for additional design exceptions and modifications to further reduce the impacts of this project on the environment. We are dissatisfied with the statements in response to the Sierra Club Marin Groups comment letter (Volume 3, page 3.5-37 – 3.5-48) that “An alternative featuring additional design exceptions was considered but rejected as it did not meet the project’s needs and purpose.” What was surprising to read in the FEIR/FEIS; “an alternative which featured non-standard frontage shoulder widths, mainline median widths, and mainline shoulder widths was considered but *was not evaluated*, since it had been rejected.” (3.5-45) The Sierra Club Marin Group strongly believes the needs and purpose of reducing congestion can be achieved simultaneously with reducing the environmental impacts to the project using design exceptions and modifications. What Caltrans must do, to the greatest extent feasible, is to *adequately reduce the impacts of the project on the environment*. We believe Caltrans can design and construct this project, still meeting its needs and purpose, by creating a project using non-standard lane and shoulder

widths, non-standard frontage road lane widths, modified interchange design, modified horizontal and vertical curve alignments, etc throughout the Narrows.

There is no reason to apply the projects' needs or purpose, which is to reduce congestion, to the requirement for using standard width frontage roads in the Narrows. The FEIR/FEIS, page 3.2-79, states that "frontage roads largely seek to replace at-grade connections to U.S. 101 or access to local businesses and residences and properties. As such, they are not serving major traffic movements." Page 4-19 states, reducing the lane and shoulder widths would significantly reduce the footprint of the project. If Caltrans would reduce a greater portion of the project's footprint, including the width of the frontage roads, the overall project impacts on land use, water quality, storm water run off, air quality, energy, wetlands, plant and animal species, etc would be minimized, thus further reducing its environmental impacts. Reducing the footprint would also reduce the need of right-of-way purchase, impacts to adjacent farm and agricultural lands and cost of the project.

The significant impact of the removal of a multitude of oak trees, when reconstructing the Redwood Landfill Interchange, could be substantially reduced if design exceptions and modifications to this interchange were permitted. This would reduce the size of the deep cut into the hillside for the westward alignment of the proposed frontage road. The FEIR/FEIS declines to consider alternative design options and insists on using only stand Caltrans interchange designs which create a significant impact. This goes against local governmental policies and ordinances calling for the preservation of oak trees. This significant impact could easily be reduced if design exceptions and creative design solutions were utilized. Alternative interchange designs have been built by Caltrans in other roadway projects in California. It is inappropriate for Caltrans to not allow the use of an alternative interchange design at the Redwood Landfill, which would significantly reduce the impacts.

The FEIR/FEIS page 3.2-22 states MSN project would create a total of 205 ac of new impervious surface; 157 ac in Segment B, the Narrows. This would increase run off and contribute to storm water run off pollutant loading. Reducing the footprint of the project would reduce these environmental impacts.

The Sierra Club Marin Group has grave concerns about the amount of earth movement and the visual impacts of realignment of U.S. 101 260 feet westerly between San Antonio Rd. and Cloud Lane (Gunn Lane). According to the FEIR/FEIS this will require a cut up to 43 feet deep and the movement of 495,000 cubic meters (equivalent of 19,800 haul trips) of earth. This excessive number of truck hauls will require the use of a significant amount of indirect energy. We believe design exceptions as well as modifications of the design could be made to significantly reduce this excessive amount of removal of trees, cut, fill and soil movement. This cut and change in the highway's curvature would create a substantial adverse impact and significantly change the corridors overall visual quality.

The FEIR/FEIS in Volume 3, page 2-18 states "the project does not qualify as a safety project because it does not exhibit the accident rate that meets or exceeds the state average for accidents on similar facilities monitored by the Traffic Accident Surveillance and Analysis System." If the accident rate is so low, and the current roadway configuration is considered safe, why make significant changes to the roadway curves and sight distance which would allow for increased vehicle speed which in turn would then create new safety and hazardous conditions.

Regarding the FEIR/FEIS discussion of energy, the documents fail to discuss the indirect energy which would be used to produce the materials for and to carry out construction of the MSN. The FEIR/FEIS states (page 3.3.8), "in the long term the direct, or operating energy requirements are usually greater and of primary importance. This discussion, therefore,

focuses on the direct energy requirements for on going U.S. 101 operations with or without the proposed project.” This FEIR/FEIS rationale for not discussing indirect energy is inadequate. The indirect energy used to construct the project must also be evaluated in the FEIR/FEIS in order to understand the energy required for constructing the various alternatives. This information would assist in analyzing and understanding how much indirect energy would be saved during construction if there was a reduction in the projects footprint, decrease in amount of materials used, cutback in degree of grading, cut and fill, etc. On page 3.2-112 (3.2.8.1) it states, “The CEQA Guidelines, Energy Conservation state that EIR’s are required to include a discussion of potential energy impacts of the proposed project, with particular emphasis on avoiding or reducing inefficient, wasteful and unnecessary consumption of energy.” If design exceptions were allowed on widths of shoulders, frontage roads, interchange design, realignment of the freeway, cuts and fills, project foot print, etc, the MSN project would still reduce congestion, but also be able to reduce the amount of indirect energy used to construct the project. The FEIR/FEIS fails to discuss this issue and thus there is no understanding in this document about how indirect energy is to be used or could be reduced.

Additionally, the comment letter from the California Regional Water Quality Control Board (dated June 26, 2008, Appendix C) states, “The Department has expressed intent to mitigate for the entirety of impacts to the jurisdictional wetlands and waters at Burdell Mitigation Bank.” There is no further discussion or acknowledgement regarding this statement of intent by the CRWQCB in the FEIR/FEIS. Appendix J, page J-9 states, “Potential off-site mitigation through private conservation covenants and at Skaggs Island and along the Petaluma River.” The Sierra Club objects to using a “bank” as a mitigation measure for loss of MSN wetlands. Impacts to jurisdictional wetlands must be mitigated, to the greatest extent feasible, as close to the project area as possible. The Mira Monte property which we understand is now for sale is contiguous to the MSN project. Purchase of all or part of this property and expansion of the existing seasonal wetland would be a more affective mitigation for the wetlands and waters of the U.S.

In conclusion, the Sierra Club Marin Group is dismayed at the reluctance of the FEIR/FEIS to discuss design exceptions and modifications to reduce the project footprint and the significant impacts of the MSN project. The mitigation measures listed on page 4-39, Table 4-5, Significant Impacts and Mitigation Measures, and Appendix J, Mitigation Monitoring Report Program, describing minimization, replacement, or avoidance measures are inadequate. Mitigation measures must be applied to the greatest extent feasible. The needs and purpose of the project do not adequately encompass the significant environmental impacts which will be created in this sensitive corridor by this project. The process and rationale used to decide which alternatives would be studied was too narrowly defined. The mitigation measures presented in the FEIR/FEIS are thus inadequate to reduce the significant environmental impacts created by this project.

Yours truly,



Elena Belsky, Chair  
Sierra Club Marin Group

Cc:

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Marin County Board of Supervisors  
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