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100+ residents turn out for I-5/Hwy. 56 plan update

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Reporter

DEL MAR — More than 100 frustrated residents voiced their concerns about the Interstate 5/Highway 56 Freeway Connectors Project at the Dec. 13 meeting of the Torrey Pines Community Planning Board.

The meeting, held at the Del Mar Hills School Auditorium, focused on the project, which has caused quite a stir among dozens of homeowners who live just west

of Interstate 5 in the Torrey Pines area.

Caltrans officials say the goal of the project is to improve the flow of traffic and reduce congestion between Interstate 5 and Highway 56. More than 250,000 commuters drive through the corridor each day, a number that will only grow over the next 10 years.

At the meeting, Allan Kosup of Caltrans and Chris Johnson of Dokken Engineering presented the latest design proposals, which are broken down into three main alternatives.

The Direct Connectors Alternative would feature one bridge that would allow traffic to flow directly from Interstate 5 south to Highway 56 east, and one bridge from Highway 56 west to Interstate 5 north. This design, however, would result in the demolition of approximately 30 homes on Portofino Drive just west of Interstate 5. About 20 more homes would lose a backyard or other property.

The Auxiliary Lane Alternative would involve construction of an auxiliary freeway lane from Carmel Valley Road to Del Mar Heights Road, with a northbound Interstate 5 ramp at Carmel Valley Road.

"The Auxiliary Lane Alternative would have a much smaller footprint," Johnson said. "I don't envision any homes being taken with this option."

The third alternative, referred to as the "no build" option, would result in making no changes at all.

"The one thing I want to stress is that we are in the very early stages of this project," Kosup said. "When we look at the costs and benefits, project impact is a type of cost. 'No build' is always one of our options."

Kosup added that traffic studies for the project would be conducted over the next two months. The current goal is to make a final recommendation and release an Environmental Impact Report for public review by early 2009.

San Diego City Council President Scott Peters made a brief appearance at the meeting and tried to ease the concerns of local residents.

"It would be stupid for us to build those flyovers," Peters said. "Flyover" is another term for the bridges that are proposed in the Direct Connectors Alternative. "It would be really harmful to the community and it's something we need to avoid. We have an opportunity to decide how this unfolds."

Peters was optimistic that a solution to the area's traffic woes can be found without demolishing 30 homes, but he said it is still necessary to improve the congestion between the two freeways.

"There is pressure from the region and pressure from other parts of the district, just across the highway, to do something to make it better," Peters said. "San Diego is a center of innovation throughout the world. There's no way we can't figure out how to lay down concrete so that we don't lose these homes."

One resident frustrated by the current proposals is Philip Rafael, who resides on Portofino Drive.

“These alternatives are all focusing on commuter traffic, which is not the only way to move people,” Rafael said. “We need to focus on adding more public transportation.”

Other residents asked for a Web site with up-to-date information about the project. A Web site for the project exists, but many residents were unaware of it as it has been part of the city of San Diego’s Web site and it currently doesn’t provide detailed images of the proposed alternatives.

“I’d defer to the city’s Web site for now, but I caution that this project could change daily,” Kosup said.

Morton Printz, chair of the Torrey Pines Community Planning Board, said the community needs an updated Web site now so residents can view the alternatives. “Waiting until the EIR comes out would be too late,” Printz said.

Residents also expressed concerns over potential noise issues, which Kosup said would be examined in the environmental document.

“The way noise issues are typically mitigated is through sound walls or sound berms,” Kosup said. “We’re also looking into new pavement surfaces that are quieter.”

What does it all boil down to? At this point, many residents of Portofino Drive, such as Steve Olsher, simply don’t know. “A lot of things are up in the air,” Olsher said. “As residents, we need to stay verbal about this.”

For more information regarding the Interstate 5/Highway 56 Freeway Connectors Project, visit www.torreypinescommunity.org.

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