

scott d palamar

August 30, 2011

Mr. Cedrik Zemitis
Project Manager, Caltrans - District 9
cedrik.zemitis@dot.ca.gov

Dear Cedrik:

It is my assertion, and of other property owners in Olancha/Cartago, that CalTrans is making decisions about the Olancha/Cartago 4-Lane project that disregard the sentiments and well-being of the affected communities. This letter makes a basic case for this argument and implores CalTrans to step back and reconsider options in cooperation with the Inyo government, landowners, and residents.

I begin with two examples:

One is CalTrans' decision to locate a "borrow site at the end of Fall Road and south of Olancha Creek... to provide soil and road materials for the project." Fall Road is the most travelled residential feeder road in the greater community, yet with untold acreage of government land surrounding the project area, CalTrans wants to disturb the neighborhood with years of truck traffic and the accompanying danger, noise, fumes, and dust. This cannot stand.

A second is CalTrans' decision to pursue an 'Alternative' that was never presented to the public or local government for input, and ignores the fact that overwhelming majority of local residents responding to a poll elected for a non-divided highway expansion of the current route (Alternative 1).

You informed me that CalTrans has already spent over \$5.5 million of State and Federal Taxpayers' money through June 27, 2011 on studies, reports and proposed solutions, for a project "to convert approximately 12.6 miles of the existing U.S. Highway 395 from a two-lane conventional highway into a four-lane highway" that will cost "roughly \$100 million" to complete. I predict if the actual efficiency and safety benefits for the expenditure of another \$95 million were put to the cash-strapped taxpayer of California, they would likely vote to do nothing except optimize efficiency and safety along the existing path. I would.

CalTrans arrived at six alternatives, which were presented to the public and Inyo County Government for "outside world" opinions. Despite strong preferences expressed by the Inyo County Board of Supervisors, the local Transportation Board, and community members, all of which were in favor of Alternative 1 (widen existing road), CalTrans staff recommended Alternative 3. This path represents a complete bypass of the community's current consumer business zone in Olancha, and isolates the majority of Cartago from Olancha by returning to the current route (which in itself already bisects the residences of Cartago).

The Inyo County General Plan characterizes avoiding the bypass of communities within the Owens Valley as a "critical," a decree plainly was not considered significant in CalTrans' decision.

Nowhere along the Inyo County 395 corridor are any communities bypassed. It is considered perfectly acceptable that I-395 traffic slows as low as 25mph through the towns of Lone Pine, Independence, Big Pine, and Bishop, where visitors have an opportunity to partake of local consumer offerings. Were it not for tourism, the communities of Inyo County could scarcely survive, given the well known growth limitations imposed by the Federal and City of Los Angeles Governments. As it is, Owens Valley settlements have been on the decline for decades, and each new change that reduces revenue potential is a huge blow to local commerce.

Whereas Olancha/Cartago represents the least established communities in term of infrastructure and consumer businesses, it also represents the greatest potential for growth in Owens Valley in its availability of water rights and developable private land. Further, south Owens Valley is already the source of major Inyo County employment and tax revenue, having Crystal Geysers, Coso Geothermal, and LADWP Lake Operations located here.

California's current population of 37 million is expected to grow to between 42 and 48 million by 2020, as much as 30%. With competent leadership, Olancha/Cartago is the best positioned area within Owens Valley to absorb some of this growth and prosper by it. Apparently CalTrans' does not speculate on the future, but only factors current conditions (which are far from optimal in Olancha/Cartago)

Despite CalTrans' unsubstantiated assertions otherwise, a complete bypass of the communities by travelers heading for other final destinations is an obvious deterrent to the well being of roadside businesses whose livelihood depend greatly on visibility. In public meetings there were suggestions, even from CalTrans' own staff, that a widening in place could, through renewal, actually add new vitality to the communities, especially if the speed limit was set under 65mph.

Of the five real Alternatives presented, none stood out as being particularly superior or inferior by CalTrans' metrics, yet its staff nonetheless settled on a recommendation in conflict with the sentiments and future potential of the Inyo County community at large.

There are a multitude of factors at play and it would take many pages to address all of concern to me and the community, so I shall touch on only one more here, which is the relative environmental impact of the candidate alternatives. None of the alternatives was presented as more disruptive to the existing environment, an assertion that left many local heads shaking in disbelief. The disruption caused by Alternative 1 would be mostly to existing development along the already paved path. Recommended Alternative 3 calls for an entirely new road averaging 115' wide to be constructed, along with a new connector road to Highway 190 immediately paralleling Olancha Creek (and effectively bisecting the community of Olancha), while leaving "old" Highway 395 in place. The description speaks for itself regarding desecration of undeveloped open space.

Of course, the staff recommendation of Alternative 3 is not where the story ends.

Virtually all of the \$5.5 million was spent to arrive at six alternative solutions and staff recommendation before CalTrans District 9 Director Tom Hallenbeck, apparently in a matter of days, rejected the recommendation, and created a new alternative characterized in a press release as a simple "combination of Alternative 3 and Alternative 4."

The "Hallenbeck Alternative" basically takes the Olancha section of Alternative 4 and connects it to Alternative 3, previously described as isolating Olancha and Cartago from each other (and continuing to bisect Cartago), but does not offer details or implications.

While some Olancha homeowners were relieved to hear that new I-395 would not be as close to their homes as with the staff recommended path, the fact is that it introduces many new issues that CalTrans does not intend to air with the public and local government as they did with the original route proposals.

For one, the new alternative does not present a new scheme to connect I-395 with Highway 190. Therefore, it can only be currently assumed that 'old' 395 will become a new extension of existing Highway 190 and will not be relinquished to Inyo County for any other purpose. If true, in practice this leaves Olancha/Cartago with two busy highways, a condition hard to imagine as safer or of no significant impact (CalTrans likes to assert safety claims only when it supports its case).

The truck traffic in and out of the Crystal Geyser bottling plant was never properly addressed in the original studies, but is of greater significance in the Hallenbeck Alternative. If no (intrusive) new connector road is proposed between Crystal Geyser and the new I-395, then it can be assumed that its around the clock truck traffic will use the “new” Highway 190 as the connection, which will not redefine old 395 as a “country lane” but rather as an industrial service highway.

CalTrans presents no vision whatsoever of how the communities will fare if their recommended or preferred alternative is implemented, and that’s probably because CalTrans has no vision. Therefore the vision is up to the people who live, work, play, and/or own in the community. I am a major residential landholder in both Olancha and Cartago, and it is my opinion that CalTrans decisions to this point represent a detriment to the present and future of my community.

I was one of the 75% of Olancha/Cartago poll responders who “voted” for an undivided highway expansion along its current route (Alternative 1). As the single largest residential landholder in Cartago, my decision was certainly not based on my property values, which I believe would be better served by relocating the highway and its noise, pollution, and danger further away (Alternative 4), but because leaving it in place seems like the best thing to do for the environment and character of the community.

Inyo County is a rather conservative place overall, where people look at change with great suspicion. There is some logic to this point of view, because change can bring unexpected consequences. It is fairly straightforward to predict how Alternative 1 would incorporate into the community, including a sense that it could even improve it through renewal. It certainly would not bring a lower speed limit which is already an unenforceable 55mph, but in reality 65mph.

If the powers at play will not allow for Alternative 1, then I would strongly support a version of Alternative 4, without a Highway 190 connection along Olancha Creek, but rather a connector perpendicular with the Crystal Geyser plant. This has viability in my opinion because if “old” 395 north of Crystal Geyser and south of 190 was converted into a rural road and there was sufficient inducement for tourism not to bypass the Olancha business district, then perhaps the communities could still prosper from reduced high speed traffic, especially from trucks, and become a quieter place that tourists might actually choose to visit for fuel, jerky, a meal, or to relax in the shade of a cottonwood tree.

In summary, I and other owner/taxpayers in Olancha/Cartago believe CalTrans is making I-395 expansion decisions that are detrimental to our community and property values, and implore it to embrace community involvement in a reconsideration and review of Alternatives. I especially emphasize the need to engage objective 3rd party expertise to describe the real world social implications of each reconsidered Alternative.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Scott Palamar". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Scott Palamar