



TOWN OF FAIRFAX

STAFF REPORT

October 11, 2022

TO: Mayor and Town Council

FROM: Michele Gardner, Town Clerk

SUBJECT: Authorize the mayor to send a letter of concern to MTC and Caltrans regarding the Highway 37 Interim Solution and Elevated Causeway

RECOMMENDATION

Authorize the mayor to send the attached letter.

DISCUSSION

Councilmember Coler requested that this item be added to the agenda for the Council's consideration. She drafted the attached letter.

FISCAL IMPACT

None identified

ATTACHMENT

Proposed letter

LETTERHEAD

Alfredo Pedroza, Chair
Metropolitan Transportation Commission
Bay Area Metro Center
375 Beale Street, Suite 800
San Francisco, CA 94105-2066

Therese McMillan, Executive Director
Metropolitan Transportation Commission
Bay Area Metro Center
375 Beale Street, Suite 800
San Francisco, CA 94105-2066

Tony Tavares, Director
California Department of Transportation (CalTrans)
P.O. Box 942873
Sacramento, CA 94273-001

Dear Chair Pedroza, Executive Director McMillan and Director Tavares:

RE: Highway 37 Interim Solution and Elevated Causeway

I am writing on behalf of the Fairfax Town Council to express our concerns regarding the “interim” project being evaluated within the Environmental Impact Report in progress by your respective Agencies. Highway 37 is a critical transportation corridor for North Bay communities – Marin County and many of our Fairfax residents and our workforce are directly affected by the commute problems on Highway 37. Virtually everyone agrees traffic congestion in this corridor is unsafe, unacceptable and must be addressed.

However, the challenges and opportunities presented by Highway 37 go beyond just traffic. Much of the highway is barely above sea level and is already impacted by flooding and extreme weather. Even with the Interim project’s widening and hardening of Highway 37, the roadway is projected to be underwater by 2040. Clearly, fundamental changes are necessary to ensure Highway 37 can withstand the looming threat of sea level rise. Highway 37 also cuts through and impairs the San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge and other bay lands that once comprised one of the largest tidal wetlands complexes on the West Coast. A broad coalition of stakeholders and agencies has been working for many years to reconnect and restore this wetlands complex. This nature-based solution simultaneously responds to three aspects of the climate crisis: adaptation, by providing a natural buffer against sea level rise for North Bay communities; mitigation, by reducing atmospheric carbon dioxide through the “blue carbon” benefits of salt marshes; and biodiversity, by expanding ecologically vital wetland habitat. Improving Highway 37 should be approached as a multi-benefit project that compliments and advances these critical objectives.

We find that the “Interim” solution under consideration for traffic congestion on Highway 37 to be problematic. While MTC has suggested there is broad stakeholder consensus for the project, yet several conservation groups and state/federal agencies who have participated in MTC’s “Resilient 37” stakeholder process are voicing serious concerns. We share their concern that if

this project under consideration is built, it would impair sensitive wetlands and may preclude the largest wetland restoration opportunity on the West Coast of the United States. Most likely there would be permitting and environmental challenges and would also result in worsening traffic during the two-year (or more) construction period. Additionally, if built it would be seriously overtopped by rising sea levels in just 15 years. And, importantly, if constructed, it is highly unlikely that the elevated causeway, which we consider to be the most appropriate solution for commuting as well as addressing these real environmental concerns, would ever be built.

We strongly urge MTC and CalTrans to reconsider this interim project, and to instead propose a truly “interim” congestion relief strategy such as a movable traffic barrier and use of turnouts – this would be consistent with the ultimate solution that virtually all stakeholders and permitting agencies support: a multi-modal, multi-benefit, elevated causeway that would be a national model for wetland restoration and climate-smart, resilient transportation infrastructure. The environmental, climate, and transportation benefits of this “ultimate” project are profound.

We urge both MTC and Caltrans to reconsider this project and look to the elevated causeway for Highway 37. Significant federal and state dollars are available at this time, we urge you to move forward quickly with the above interim congestion relief strategies and begin the process of planning, permitting and moving forward with the “ultimate solution.”

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Hellman, Mayor
Town of Fairfax

cc: Congressman Jared Huffman
California Senator Mike McGuire
California Assemblyman Marc Levine
Fairfax Town Council