



October 10, 2016

Chair Bob Alvarado  
California Transportation Commission  
1120 N Street, MS-52  
Sacramento, CA 95814

**Re: Tab 80 - 2016 SHOPP Amendment - Highway 17 Wildlife Crossing**

Dear Chair Alvarado and Commissioners:

The Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission (RTC) appreciates Caltrans' and the California Transportation Commission's consideration and support to amend the Highway 17 Wildlife Crossing Project into the 2016 State Highway Operation and Protection Program (SHOPP). This is an important partnership project that will improve safety for drivers, reduce wildlife fatalities, serve as advance mitigation for future transportation projects and leverage a significant amount of local and private funds.

Highway 17 winds through the Santa Cruz Mountains ("the Hill"), serving as the primary route connecting Santa Cruz County and the San Francisco Bay Area. Despite steep grades, narrow shoulders, tight curves, and scenic beauty, Highway 17 has become a specialized workhorse highway used by over 60,000 vehicles per day. In addition to serving as a lifeline route for Santa Cruz County and rural Santa Clara County residents, it also serves heavy inter-regional commuter and tourist traffic and it is the principal and shortest route for delivering goods between the Bay Area and Santa Cruz County. Unfortunately, because of the mountainous terrain, the roadway has significant collision levels and has been identified as a Safety Corridor by the California Highway Patrol (CHP).

The RTC and Caltrans Districts 4 and 5 have been working in collaboration with the CHP, local law enforcement and fire departments, and the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) for many years, through the Safe on 17 Task Force, to reduce collisions on Highway 17. Transportation and safety agencies on both sides of the hill have been implementing a range of strategies to reduce collisions on the Highway 17 corridor, including enhanced CHP enforcement, roadway improvements and public education. Common causes of collisions on SR17 (driving at unsafe speeds, vehicle right-of-way violations, improper turning and improper lane change) are exacerbated as drivers swerve to avoid wildlife attempting to cross the highway.

In order to improve safety for both drivers and wildlife, the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County has been collaborating with Caltrans and the RTC to create a safe passage for wildlife across Highway 17. This project has overwhelming support from the community to address the high number of wildlife fatalities, habitat fragmentation, and driver safety. Caltrans District 5 has completed the Project Initiation Document (PID) for this project which created the opportunity for the wildlife undercrossing to be funded through the 2016 SHOPP Advanced Mitigation reservation.



This project addresses numerous vital state priorities including:

- Improve motorist safety by reducing the number of collisions on Highway 17 related to wildlife crossing the highway whether direct collisions with wildlife or collisions that occur in order to avoid wildlife.
- Develop advanced mitigation credits so that future Caltrans projects can move more quickly and cost effectively to construction. CA Department of Fish and Wildlife have committed to working with Caltrans staff to determine advanced mitigation crediting.
- Enhancements to wildlife connectivity – Numerous local and state agencies have recognized the tremendous importance of a wildlife undercrossing of Highway 17 to connect the Santa Cruz Mountains habitat for many species including mountain lion, bobcat and deer.
- Numerous Caltrans projects have added miles of median barriers and guardrails which have substantially reduced access for wildlife to cross the highway. The undercrossing will provide a means for wildlife to safely cross under the highway while improving safety for traveling motorists.
- Leverage regional funding – Land Trust of Santa Cruz County has already raised over \$5 million for right of way and protecting the properties on both sides of the highway and is fundraising for \$3 million more for construction of the wildlife tunnel. The RTC has expressed their support by including \$5 million toward the project if a countywide sales tax measure is passed in November 2016.
- Assembly Bill 2087 (Levine), signed by the governor in September 2016, establishes a pilot project for a regional conservation investment strategy program. The Highway 17 wildlife crossing project, a high profile project with interest around the state, would be the first project of this program to establish advance mitigation credits.

The RTC is pleased to support this valuable project and recommend the Highway 17 Wildlife Crossing project be amended to the 2016 SHOPP project list.

Sincerely,

George Dondero  
Executive Director

cc: Tim Gubbins, Caltrans D5 Director

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