



October 6, 2025

To: Regional Transportation Planning Committee

From: Darrell E. Johnson, Chief Executive Officer 

Subject: Update on the Interstate 5/El Toro Road Interchange Improvement Project and Direction to Complete the Environmental Documentation

Overview

The Orange County Transportation Authority, in partnership with the California Department of Transportation, is underway with project development for the Interstate 5/El Toro Road Interchange Improvement Project. Staff is providing an update on the project development effort and is seeking Board of Directors' direction to advance project development, finalize selection of the project preferred alternative, and complete the environmental approval phase.

Recommendation

Direct staff to advance project development and the selection of the project preferred alternative, and to complete the environmental phase in late 2026.

Discussion

The Interstate 5 (I-5)/El Toro Road Interchange Project (Project) is part of Project D in the Measure M2 (M2) freeway program. During development of M2, this Project was a top priority for the cities of Laguna Hills, Laguna Woods, and Lake Forest (Cities). In the Next 10 Delivery Plan, adopted by the Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA) Board of Directors (Board) in November 2024, the Project is listed as one of the M2 freeway projects to be environmentally cleared by 2026 and shelf ready for future funding and advancement.

The existing I-5/El Toro Road interchange currently experiences congestion during the morning and afternoon peak periods, resulting in operational challenges. The Project will improve traffic flows and ease congestion within the interchange, accommodate an expected increase in regional traffic, and improve access to and from the I-5 freeway. Proposed improvements at the I-5/El Toro Road interchange include improving El Toro Road and other local

roads, modifying on- and off-ramps, and modifying, replacing, or building new bridge structures.

Through Cooperative Agreement No. C-6-1262, approved by the Board on November 22, 2016, the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) is leading the project approval/environmental document phase. Project environmental phase work began in May 2017 with the draft environmental document (ED) circulated for public review and comments in spring 2019. At that time there was no consensus amongst the Cities on a preferred alternative following public review of the two build alternatives presented in the draft ED. The M2 ordinance requires that specific improvements at this interchange be developed in cooperation with local jurisdictions and affected communities. Due to the lack of consensus amongst the Cities on a preferred alternative, the Caltrans environmental phase work was paused. OCTA initiated discussions between late 2019 and early 2020 with the Cities and Caltrans to address the lack of consensus and to discuss proposed alternatives and next steps. Between late 2020 and early 2022, OCTA completed an alternatives assessment study to look at potential additional alternatives. In March 2022, OCTA, Caltrans, and the Cities agreed on two new alternatives to move forward to the environmental phase. The environmental phase was restarted in January 2023 to specifically study these two alternatives.

Next Steps

Preliminary engineering and cost estimates are scheduled to be finalized in late 2025. The environmental technical studies are scheduled to be completed in spring 2026 and a draft ED will be circulated for public review and a public hearing conducted in summer 2026. This would lead to the selection of a preferred alternative in fall 2026 with a goal to finalize the environmental document by the end of 2026. These milestones will be reflected accordingly in the Capital Action Plan and the CEO Action Plan for 2026.

OCTA staff is actively engaged with Caltrans and the Cities to keep the Project moving forward in the environmental phase, and OCTA remains committed to achieving consensus on a preferred alternative and delivering needed improvements on the I-5/EI Toro Road interchange.

Summary

Staff seeks to reaffirm Board of Directors' approval to advance project development and the selection of the project preferred alternative, and complete the environmental phase in late 2026.

Attachment

None.

Prepared by:



Niall Barrett, P.E.
Program Manager
(714) 560-5879

Approved by:



James G. Beil, P.E.
Executive Director, Capital Programs
(714) 560-5646