




April 6, 2020

To: Regional Planning and Highways Committee

From: Darrell E. Johnson, Chief Executive Officer 

Subject: South County Traffic Relief Effort Update and Next Steps

Overview

The Transportation Corridor Agencies and the California Department of Transportation are in the process of concluding a study of toll road expansion options in south Orange County through the South County Traffic Relief Effort. Based on technical work, public input, and policy direction, three alternatives are proposed to move forward in the project development process. These include a non-tolled extension of Los Patrones Parkway from Cow Camp Road to Avenida La Pata, widening of Ortega Highway between Calle Entradero to Reata Road, and extension of the Interstate 5 carpool lane from Avenida Pico to the San Diego County line area. Other future projects will be considered as part of the Orange County Transportation Authority's comprehensive South Orange County Multimodal Transportation Study. A status report and recommended next steps are presented for review and approval.

Recommendations

- A. Direct staff to work with the Transportation Corridor Agencies, County of Orange, and City of San Clemente in the preparation of a project development plan for a non-tolled extension to Los Patrones Parkway.
- B. Direct staff to work with the California Department of Transportation and the City of San Juan Capistrano to advance funding for the final design for the widening of Ortega Highway.
- C. Direct staff to work with the California Department of Transportation and the San Diego Association of Governments to advance funding for the environmental process for Interstate 5 high-occupancy vehicle lane improvements.
- D. Direct staff to return in summer 2020 with a status report on the South Orange County Multimodal Transportation Study.

Background

The Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA) finalized the South Orange County Major Investment Study (SOCMIS) in 2008. Since that time, most of the recommendations from the SOCMIS locally-preferred strategy have been implemented or are underway, including the recently completed Interstate 5 (I-5) carpool lanes between San Juan Creek Road and Avenida Pico. There have also been significant changes since 2008 within south Orange County, including development pattern changes, elimination of the proposed State Route 241 (SR-241) Green Alignment extension (assumed in the SOCMIS baseline scenario), and the opening of Los Patrones Parkway as a north-south local arterial within right-of-way, previously reserved for the SR-241 extension. In response to these changes, along with a need to align projects to compete for various funding programs, such as the Solutions for Congested Corridors Program, in fall 2019, OCTA initiated a two-year South Orange County Multimodal Transportation Study as an update to SOCMIS.

As noted above, one of the most significant changes since SOCMIS was the elimination of the SR-241 Green Alignment. This occurred in 2016 through a settlement agreement between the Transportation Corridor Agencies (TCA), the State Attorney General, and a coalition of environmental groups. TCA has since been seeking other options to expand the toll road network. These efforts led to the development of the South County Traffic Relief Effort (SCTRE). TCA, in cooperation with the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), initiated the environmental phase in fall 2019, based on earlier planning efforts. Through these earlier planning efforts, OCTA expressed significant concerns with the planning process. These concerns generally focus on conflicts with Measure M2 (M2) projects, either already implemented, under construction, or planned by OCTA and other agencies.

Discussion

TCA and Caltrans issued a Notice of Intent/Notice of Preparation in November 2019, which started the scoping period for the environmental phase. The scoping period is primarily used to define the set of alternatives that will undergo detailed technical study and environmental analysis. This included a public comment period that concluded on February 10, 2020. The alternatives include the concepts identified in TCA's earlier planning documents.

TCA and Caltrans described ten project alternatives plus four project variations as part of the noticing for the public scoping period. Several of these alternatives would impact recently completed or ongoing projects. These include the recently completed and M2-funded carpool lanes on I-5 from Pacific Coast Highway to Avenida Pico, the M2-funded construction currently underway on I-5

from El Toro Road to Avery Parkway, and the recently constructed Los Patrones Parkway from Oso Parkway to Cow Camp Road, which is on the Master Plan of Arterial Highways. In addition, the ten project alternatives, related variations, and overall traffic assumptions include a +3.5-mile extension of the I-5 carpool lane from Avenida Pico to the San Diego County line area, and a planned 1.1-mile widening of Ortega Highway between Calle Entradero to Reata Road. The latter two projects are also included in OCTA's current Long-Range Transportation Plan and Southern California Association of Governments Regional Transportation Plan.

During the scoping period, TCA and Caltrans received 1,650 comments by the public, cities, and other stakeholders, including a comment letter sent by OCTA. General themes emerging from the scoping period comments include:

- Concerns with alternatives that conflict with other public projects;
- Concerns with potential community, open space, and preserved land impacts;
- Objection to tolling or conversion of high-occupancy vehicle lanes or existing arterial highways to tolled lanes;
- Opposition to a toll road extension to I-5;
- General support for shifting traffic eastward on a new arterial roadway (Los Patrones Parkway extension); and
- Request to defer current and future studies to OCTA.

Other more detailed comments are included in the TCA scoping summary document (available on the TCA website).

Concurrent with the scoping process, TCA and Caltrans reviewed technical travel demand modeling work and concluded that an untolled extension of Los Patrones Parkway from Cow Camp Road to Avenida La Pata offered the highest traffic relief benefit and lowest cost compared to the other build alternatives. This arterial extension would deliver more traffic to SR-241 at Oso Parkway than tolled and other alternatives.

Given the technical analysis, public input, and comments from OCTA and Caltrans, the TCA Board of Directors (Board) approved a recommendation on March 12, 2020, to direct staff to work with the County of Orange and other stakeholders to prepare a project development plan for the Los Patrones Parkway Untolled Extension (Attachment A). The TCA Board also approved recommendations to support Caltrans and OCTA efforts to advance the I-5 carpool lane improvements from Avenida Pico to the San Diego County line area, as well as support plans to complete the widening of Ortega Highway in the City of San Juan Capistrano.

Overall, the TCA recommendations – that reflect significant input from OCTA and Caltrans – complete the SCTRE process and advances the best performing and publicly-supported alternatives forward into a separate project development process, which formally concludes the TCA efforts to identify solutions for a southerly extension of the SR-241 toll road in south Orange County. Support for the March 12, 2020, TCA action has been generally well-received by the public, cities, stakeholders, and elected officials.

For OCTA, the conclusion of the SCRTE process enables the quick start-up of project development work (e.g., environmental clearance, final design, etc.) on the widening of Ortega Highway and the I-5 carpool lane extension projects. Therefore, recommendations are included in this report that direct staff to work with Caltrans, the City of San Juan Capistrano, and the San Diego Association of Governments to advance project development funding to get these projects ready for future construction funding. Further, OCTA expects to work with TCA, the County of Orange, and San Clemente on the preparation of a project development plan for a non-tolled extension Los Patrones Parkway. Regular updates on development of the plan will be prepared by the stakeholders. Staff will keep the Board apprised of the progress as appropriate.

Finally, the three projects (Los Patrones Parkway extension, Ortega Highway widening, and I-5 carpool lane extension) are focused on meeting travel demand over the next decade. Longer-term multimodal solutions are also necessary, and OCTA's South Orange County Multimodal Transportation Study will help define these future solutions. A status report will be provided to the OCTA Board in summer 2020.

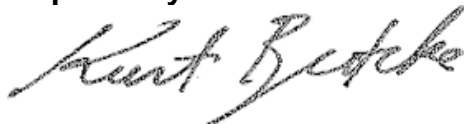
Summary

Efforts are under way to conclude the South County Traffic Relief Effort. Three alternatives are proposed to move forward in the project development process, including a non-tolled extension of Los Patrones Parkway, widening of Ortega Highway, and extension of the I-5 carpool lane. The comprehensive South Orange County Multimodal Transportation Study will consider other future multimodal improvements. Recommendations are presented to move forward in the project development process.

Attachment

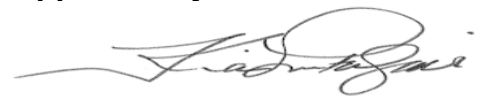
A. Key South Orange County Transportation Projects

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