



November 4, 2024

To: Regional Transportation Planning Committee

From: Darrell E. Johnson, Chief Executive Officer

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Darrell E. Johnson", is written over the "From:" line of the memo.

Subject: OC Connect Project Update and Intent to File a California Environmental Quality Act Statutory Exemption for the OC Connect Project

Overview

The Orange County Transportation Authority is the lead agency for the OC Connect Project, a proposed shared-use path connecting the cities of Santa Ana and Garden Grove along the Pacific Electric Right-of-Way. Pursuant to Section 21080.25 of the Public Resources Code, the Orange County Transportation Authority intends to file a California Environmental Quality Act statutory exemption of this project.

Recommendation

Receive and file as an information item.

Background

The Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA), in cooperation with the cities of Garden Grove and Santa Ana (cities), the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) District 12, and the Orange County Public Works (OCPW), proposes approximately four miles of Class I shared-use path (path). This new active transportation facility would connect the cities and close a three-mile-long gap between a future bikeway on Santa Ana Boulevard and downtown Garden Grove.

Discussion

Location and Activities

The proposed OC Connect Project (Project) would be constructed as a paved shared-use path, allowing nonmotorized use, and following Caltrans Class I bikeway design standards as specified in the Caltrans Highway Design Manual Chapter 1000. It may include a parallel unpaved walking trail where space

allows. The Project will add connectivity to the region by building approximately 1.6 miles of new path in the City of Garden Grove and 2.4 miles of new path in the City of Santa Ana, creating a seamless four-mile facility connecting two downtown areas as well as two important active transportation corridors including the countywide 66-mile Class I OC Loop via the Santa Ana River Trail and the Class IV separated bikeway on Hazard Avenue. OC Connect is funded by a \$3 million Active Transportation Program grant to prepare the environmental analysis for the path. Caltrans, as assigned by the Federal Highway Administration, is the lead agency under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). OCTA is the lead agency under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The current project phase, also known as the Project Approval and Environmental Document (PA/ED), will define the preferred alignment of the trail by completing preliminary design, determining the trail's feasibility, estimating project costs, and determining what, if any, avoidance or mitigation measures must be taken to complete the Project. The Project includes extensive communication to local stakeholders and the surrounding community through a public outreach and input campaign.

Project Purpose and Need

The purpose of the Project is to build active transportation infrastructure for the local communities (cities) and the region by:

- Increasing local and regional active transportation connectivity by closing the active transportation gap between the City of Santa Ana, the Santa Ana River Trail, and the City of Garden Grove.
- Providing an equitable, accessible, sustainable, and convenient first and last mile transit connectivity with an improved active transportation network.

The project is needed to address the following deficiencies:

- There are limited reliable and direct active transportation options connecting residents from the cities to one another and to the regional bikeway network (Santa Ana River Trail).
- First and last mile active transportation connectivity to the OCTA Transit network is limited due to road network characteristics such as right-of-way (ROW) constraints, high vehicular traffic speeds, and volumes.

Environmental Approach

NEPA

NEPA requires the analysis of environmental impacts for all federally funded projects. For the Project, Caltrans is serving as the NEPA Lead Agency. Based on the analysis completed by OCTA during the proposed project's 2022 Preliminary Environmental Study, it was determined that there were likely no significant impacts and that a NEPA categorical exclusion would be appropriate. A NEPA categorical exclusion means that the Project does not require preparation of an environmental assessment or an environmental impact statement.

CEQA

Public Resources Code Section 21080.25 establishes statutory exemptions for certain transportation projects. Projects that qualify for a statutory exemption are not subject to the requirement to prepare a CEQA document or other project-specific environmental analysis. The Project aligns with the exemptions as summarized below:

- Class I multi-use trail supporting active transportation users within OCTA-owned ROW and along the County of Orange/Orange County Flood Control District East Garden Grove-Wintersburg Channel maintenance road ROW. The multi-use trail would have up to 16 different entry points providing access to affordable transit, including the 66-mile Class I OC Loop, the Santa Ana Regional Transportation Center, the future OC Streetcar, as well as multiple bus stops. (Section 21080.25(b)(1))
- New wayfinding and customer information for path and transit users within the public ROW would be included as part of the Project. (Section 21080.25(b)(2))
- OCTA is the local agency and the lead CEQA agency implementing this Project during the PA/ED phase. (Section 21080.25(c)(1))
- Modifications to existing roadways in support of vehicle capacity needs are not included as part of the Project. (Section 21080.25(c)(2))
- The Project would not require the demolition of affordable housing units. (Section 21080.25(c)(3))

Based upon the above criteria, this Project meets the definition of a statutorily exempt project and is consistent with the provisions of Public Resources Code Section 21080.25, which accelerates sustainable transportation projects.

Public Outreach

Phase I

The project team conducted Phase I of public outreach between October and December 2023. The goal of this phase was to assess the public's walking and bicycling habits, gauge their interest in a variety of trail amenities, and prioritize design criteria being used by the project team to vet various trail alignments and alternatives. The project team interfaced with the public using the following:

- Online survey,
- Interactive story map,
- Two public meetings (one virtual and one in-person),
- Five pop-up tables at community events,
- Social media engagement,
- Development and distribution of a communications resource toolkit to 51 local organizations,
- Digital noticing, and
- An interview with Vietnam America Television.

Outreach activities and materials were made available in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese and focused on the areas immediately surrounding the project in the cities.

Phase II

The project team is in the process of delivering Phase II of public outreach, which began on September 18, 2024, and continues through November 15, 2024. The Phase II outreach goal is to inform the public of how their feedback on walking and bicycling habits, potential trail amenities, and design criteria was used to vet various trail alignments and alternatives. This information will be incorporated into the design plans as well as further prioritizing and developing trail amenity options to inform the design phase of the project. In addition, this phase is being conducted to advise residents and stakeholders that OCTA intends to file a CEQA statutory exemption for the Project.

As a part of this process, OCTA is holding three publicly noticed meetings:

- Wednesday, October 2, 2024, 6:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m., Vista Global Academy,
- Monday, November 4, 2024, OCTA Regional Transportation Planning Committee meeting, beginning at 10:30 a.m., and
- Thursday, November 7, 2024, Artesia Pilar Neighborhood Association Meeting, 6:00 p.m. – 7:00 p.m.

These meetings will afford an opportunity to hear and respond to public comments related to the Project and the intent of OCTA to file a CEQA statutory exemption.

Concurrently with both phases of public outreach, the project team held meetings with both internal and external project stakeholders to introduce the Project, discuss alignment and amenity options, and identify and troubleshoot any potential issues. Stakeholders include the cities, the Orange County Flood Control District, Caltrans District 12, the OC Streetcar, the OCTA Garden Grove Bus Base, and the California Public Utilities Commission, as well as community stakeholder groups such as the Artesia Pilar Neighborhood Council, schools, and businesses in the area. The project team maintains an ongoing dialogue with all stakeholders as the environmental document and design plans are developed and refined.

Trail Design

The project team has completed draft 35 percent design plans and is incorporating comments by project stakeholders. The design plans include layout and typical section elements for the trail. This will provide sufficient detail to complete the requisite engineering and technical studies as well as the environmental documents. Implementation of the subsequent project phases will be at the discretion of the local agencies.

A key element identified in the Project is the original Red Car Pegram truss bridge spanning the Santa Ana River. The project team completed a Structural Evaluation Report and Advanced Planning Study for the structure and determined that the bridge will be reusable with minimal impact to the existing structure. Retrofits will be necessary including replacement of the existing bearings, raising the bridge by approximately 4.5 feet to provide a minimum 12.5-foot clearance for maintenance and emergency vehicles under the bridge, bridge decking for active transportation use, and safety railing attached to the decking along the length of the bridge.

\$6 million in funding for final design has been secured through the following:

- \$750,000 earmark from Congressman Lou Correa for the design of the upgraded bridge,
- \$350,000 Department of Toxic Substances Control grant for the Phase II environmental site assessment,
- \$1,000,000 Environmental Protection Agency grant for site assessment and cleanup, and
- \$3,900,000 through the State Transportation Improvement Program.

Pending the final cost estimate for design activities, the Project has secured funding to proceed through the final design phase.

Summary

OCTA, in cooperation with the cities, Caltrans, and OCPW, proposes approximately four miles of Class I shared-use path. The new active transportation facility would connect the cities and close a three-mile-long mobility gap between a future bikeway on Santa Ana Boulevard and downtown Garden Grove. The PA/ED phase of the Project is anticipated to be completed by June 2025. This Project meets the definition of a CEQA statutorily exempt project and is consistent with the intent of Public Resources Code 21080.25, which accelerates sustainable transportation projects. This project meets the criteria for, and will be filed as, a NEPA categorical exclusion.

Attachment

- A. OC Connect Fact Sheet

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