

Editorial: Don't let lawsuit stall widening of the Narrows

Staff Report

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A GROUP that advocates public transit over widening highways has tossed some legal spikes on the road to widening the Novato Narrows, a dangerous stretch of Highway 101 that's regularly the scene of bumper-to-bumper traffic.

The Transportation Solutions Defense and Education Fund, led by David Schonbrunn of Sausalito, has filed a lawsuit aimed at stopping work being done to pave the way for approval of expanding 101 to three lanes in each direction.

The group's suit demands that Caltrans first prepare a study on the potential greenhouse gas-generating effect of adding new lanes to Highway 101. "Caltrans is acting as though climate change is occurring on some other planet," Schon-brunn told IJ reporter Mark Prado.

His comments are inflammatory and an unfair assessment of the project.

The extra lanes and other improvements are needed to improve safety along with increasing capacity.

What Schonbrunn wants is an analysis that looks at the greenhouse-gas impacts of the project before officials give it their approval. We don't have a problem with that analysis, but we don't think it should slow the project down.

His group contends that expanding bus service is smarter environmentally than widening the freeway.

The group argues that widening the highway will

hurt transit ridership.

Traffic congestion probably pushes people to use public transit - buses, ferries and trains. But so does the cost of gasoline, convenience, comfort and concern about the environment.

The Novato Narrows project is aimed at easing the daily double dose of gridlock on the stretch of Highway 101 between Novato and Petaluma. It is the scene of traffic jams every weekday morning and evening for the 80,000 motorists who travel between the two counties. Many Marin firms rely on workers who commute from their homes in Sonoma.

The recent opening of new lanes on Highway 101 between Puerto Suello Hill in San Rafael and Lucky Drive in Corte Madera removed a chronic commute bottleneck, but traffic still gets jammed in northern Novato, where northbound lanes narrow to two.

The Novato Narrows widening proposes adding carpool lanes in each direction. Those lanes are designed to provide incentives and rewards for commuters who carpool or ride the bus.

That seems preferable to the pollution-generating status quo.

Schonbrunn is no stranger to Marin's transportation debates. He has been a stalwart supporter of the Sonoma-Marín Area Rail Transit train, which will serve the same transportation corridor. Marin certainly needs public-transit advocates to lobby for convenient, affordable and dependable service.

Schonbrunn also has been a steadfast critic of the Novato Narrows project. He now has decided it is time to throw legal tacks in the path of a much-needed improvement of one of the most congested highways in the region. The stretch also is

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dangerous, with dozens of places where drivers have to cut across traffic, pull out of what essentially are driveways and can even try to make U-turns.

We agree with his concern about greenhouse gases, but we remain unconvinced that delaying this project, which will mean more bumper-to-bumper traffic spewing pollution, is going to measurably help the environment.

Getting traffic - including buses and carpools - moving on this stretch of road would be more effective. And safer for the tens of thousands of commuters who use the Narrows each day.

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