

Lawsuit fights Novato Narrows project: Critic: Climate change ignored

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A Sausalito man could put a halt to the \$745 million Novato Narrows widening project before the first shovel hits the ground.

David Schonbrunn, president of the Transportation Solutions Defense and Education Fund, a San Rafael-based nonprofit watchdog group, has filed a lawsuit against the California Department of Transportation alleging the agency's environmental impact report on the project is flawed.

Schonbrunn said that while the environmental report discloses the project will increase greenhouse gases by 27 percent annually in the corridor, it did not analyze the significance of that impact on climate change, and didn't consider alternative means of accomplishing the project's goals that would avoid climate impacts.

"Caltrans is acting as though climate change is occurring on some other planet," said Schonbrunn, who won a victory last week in a separate case when he convinced a Sacramento Superior Court judge to rule the environmental report on the state's planned high-speed train was "inadequate."

Caltrans officials had not seen the Novato Narrows lawsuit, which also was filed in Sacramento Superior Court, and declined comment.

Dianne Steinhauser, executive director of the Transportation Authority of Marin, who has worked on the Narrows project, said the widening and

added carpool lane are needed. Presently a section of Highway 101 between Marin and Sonoma counties narrows from three to two lanes, causing backups.

"Nothing in the law says you would be breaking the law if you built a carpool lane," said Steinhauser, who said she supports SMART rail service and bus service as a way to get people through the corridor. "I'm not sure what Caltrans did was wrong. This project is not a bad one, it moves people which helps the economy. The Narrows will continue to be a bottleneck. What do you do about it?"

Caltrans lost a similar case in which an analysis of the Highway 50 carpool lane widening project in El Dorado County was ruled to be inadequate because it failed to analyze the climate change impacts of that project. The agency was required to do more analysis.

Climate change is caused by an increase in greenhouse gases, which in turn are caused in part by the burning of fossil fuels.

"Widening a congested highway encourages people to drive more and longer trips and those trips then increase the amount of greenhouse gases emitted by motor vehicles," Schonbrunn said.

Currently, more than 60 percent of the greenhouse gas emissions for Marin and Sonoma counties come from motor vehicles, according to the lawsuit.

"With recent scientific analysis of climate change showing significant warming effects decades earlier than had been predicted, immediate reduction in greenhouse gas emissions is crucial," Schonbrunn said.

But Steinhauser and others note the Narrows stretch is one of the worst morning commute pockets in the

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Bay Area.

The Narrows is also a dangerous stretch of road. Because it is not a freeway, there are three places between the Redwood Landfill and the Petaluma Boulevard South exit where drivers can make left turns or U-turns across traffic. That can be a dangerous maneuver when traffic is moving in a solid stream at 65 mph - or faster. The result has been a number of fatal accidents, as well injury accidents that cause traffic headaches.

Work on the Novato portion of the project is slated to start as soon as late 2011 or early 2012, Steinhauser said. The project extends 17 miles between Highway 37 in Novato and Old Redwood Highway in Petaluma.

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