

County of Riverside



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FIRST DISTRICT

Sandra J. Isom
Debbie Walsh

January 8, 2009

Cathy Bechtel
Riverside County Transportation Commission
P.O. Box 12008
Riverside, CA 92502-2208



RE: Mid County Parkway DEIR/DEIS

Dear Ms. Bechtel:

The Mid County Parkway is perhaps the largest public works project that this County and Commission have ever pursued. I welcome the focus that it is bringing on the need to improve transportation corridors, which I have long championed. A project of this magnitude needs to carefully balance transportation benefits with the impacts that it will create environmentally and on the adjacent communities and their quality of life.

Nearly half of the planned corridor travels through the unincorporated areas of the 1st District. I have heard from many of my constituents regarding both the impacts and benefits that they expect the MCP to bring to the communities of Mead Valley, Woodcrest, Lake Mathews, Gavilan Hills and La Sierra. It is crucial that the MCP be planned in a way that truly minimizes impacts on adjacent existing and future residents, that will live with the impacts on a daily basis, while also improving mobility for all of Western Riverside County. I offer the following comments to the Commission and urge for your assistance in taking them into account to modify this project in a way that balances transportation needs, the environment and the health and quality of life of those most affected.

The MCP needs to use parts of existing Cajalco Road. Cajalco has been planned as a major corridor for several decades. Residents have moved into this area with the expectation that Cajalco will be widened, and in fact there are very few residents adjacent to the existing road beyond Mead Valley. I understand the benefit of a southerly route for the "locally preferred" MCP that is proposed to bypass Mead Valley, due to the impact that expanding Cajalco would have on this stretch with many existing homes and small parcels. However, the MCP should be realigned as you leave Mead Valley to the west to make use of the right-of-way of existing Cajalco Road as much and practicable for the following major reasons:

1. We need improved transportation now. The County is pursuing a project to widen Cajalco to four lanes, which could be accomplished in the next five or so years with cooperation for MWD, RCTC and other agencies. I am concerned that the "promise"

of an MCP on an entirely new 17-mile alignment between I-15 and I-215 may seriously hamper the County's plan to widen Cajalco, since ultimately one alignment south of Lake Mathews may be all that can be permitted environmentally to avoid fracturing the various open space preserves. It also makes it very challenging to invest scarce transportation dollars on Cajalco when there is a public promise of a new alignment "someday" that will require vast amounts of public funds. Most of the alignment of the locally preferred MCP route east of I-215 is on existing Ramona Expressway, while none of it is on Cajalco between I-215 and I-15. Many of the same reasons why it makes great sense to overlay the MCP on portions of Ramona, a long planned major corridor that the County has been preserving right-of-way on for years, also apply to Cajalco.

2. Cajalco is an affordable project that can be built in stages – The County's Transportation Department has indicated that they can deliver a 4-lane improvement to Cajalco in the range of \$150-200 million. Even if improvements are ever needed beyond that to this corridor along the existing road, they can be done at a much lesser cost than the full freight of the MCP. An MCP that combines an alignment south of Mead Valley with Cajalco can be built in stages. The MCP as a stand-alone, entirely new 17 mile corridor that doesn't use existing roads is estimated to cost in excess of \$3 billion in today's dollars, with much of the cost between I-15 and I-215. Other critical projects that this Commission is tackling, such as improvements to SR 91, I-15, I-215, corridors to San Bernardino County, rail commitments, and others that will come to the fore in the future, will need to be delayed or , sidelined to fund this one project. With long term federal and state funding assistance ever-more unlikely, it will be up to Riverside County residents to fund our own transportation solutions.

3. We need to more closely mesh transportation and environmental issues. The County's Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Plan (MSHCP) that was completed just five years ago is a state-of-the-art program to comprehensively deal with endangered species that provides habitat for their survival, but also regulatory authority to construct projects on the County's General Plan like Cajalco Road. I understand concern for re-opening MWD's Habitat Conservation Plan around Lake Mathews is one of the primary reasons for the far-south alignment being selected as "locally preferred." Certainly this is a critical preserve, and MWD needs to be a major player in the improvement of Cajalco Road. However, the far-south alignment has the greatest impact on MSHCP criteria areas. There are opportunities here to work together with MWD and other existing reserves like Harford Springs to deliver a comprehensive open-space plan, instead of a series of stand-alone plans.

4. Respect the rights of existing Rural Communities – The County's 2003 General Plan (The Riverside County Integrated Project) was the most comprehensive effort that this County has ever undertaken to balance the environment, transportation, and land use to create a blue print for growth and development that respects local preferences. Putting a new corridor through Gavilan Hills will profoundly change the quality of life and future development patterns in this area. Rural communities are a dwindling resource in this County that cannot be easily replaced, and provide a life-style choice for our residents that should not be overlooked. Adoption of the "locally preferred" alternative for the MCP puts a cloud on how residents can use their property, whether or not such an expensive project ever gets built.

In summary, I urge the Commission to further look at this portion of the MCP between I-215 and I-15, more specifically the area westerly of Mead Valley. I believe that by staying predominantly on the existing Cajalco alignment we can deliver the necessary road improvements much sooner, at the least cost to tax payers and in the most environmentally responsible way.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bob Buster", written in a cursive style.

Bob Buster
Supervisor, 1st District

CC: Board of Supervisors
Juan Perez, County Transportation Department