

Studies continue on TriLink project to connect East Contra Costa and Tracy area

By Paul Burgarino *Contra Costa Times Contra Costa Times*
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Contra Costa transportation leaders are looking to shed East County's "cul-de-sac" mentality once and for all.

As work continues to widen Highway 4 through Antioch and into Brentwood, studies have begun for a long-sought freeway that would connect the region to the San Joaquin Valley. Most agree there is a travel gap caused by having only two-lane country roads to the east, and that a freeway would make the region more economically viable.

Though there is no set route yet, the 20-mile stretch of Highway 239 would run from about Highway 4 south of Brentwood to Interstates 205 and 580 near Tracy.

"With the progress being made on widening Highway 4 and areas like Mountain House starting to grow again, it makes sense to start looking at it," said Jim Frazier, a Contra Costa Transportation Authority board member and an Oakley councilman.

The county agency took control of studying the TriLink project earlier this year. Its role is to bring all concerned parties in Alameda, Contra Costa and San Joaquin counties to the table and move plans ahead quickly, said county Supervisor Mary Nejedly Piepho, of Discovery Bay.

"We don't want the studies lingering out here for years on end," she said.

Highway 239 was first identified more than 50 years ago and approved by the state Legislature, but studies have been in the slow lane. Contra Costa County was granted \$14 million in federal earmarks for its planning in 2005, but it did not receive Caltrans approval to access the money until January 2010.

About \$2.9 million of that federal money is to study the project and choose a preferred alignment.

Much of the focus in East Contra Costa transportation the past decade has been on connecting the region to the West, including widening Highway 4, building the Highway 4 bypass and eBART.

Now, officials say it's time to start looking Eastward.

Highway 239 would help create jobs and bring businesses to East Contra Costa, while reducing traffic congestion on Highway 4 and Interstates 580 and 680, Piepho said.

"It's a critical component to our road infrastructure," she said.

Consulting firm Parsons Transportation Group was hired last year to study the "lay of the land" and identify ways to improve travel in the area, said Martin Englemann, the Contra Costa Transportation Agency's deputy director of planning.

Options for the route include improving existing roads, adding more roads in the area or adding a full-fledged highway with eBART in the median.

"We're really looking at everything possible," Englemann said.

The cost of possible improvements would range from \$20 million to \$200 million, depending on which option is chosen, he said.

Four oversight groups will vet the findings of the study and ultimately decide how to proceed -- elected officials, city and county administrators, staff from various transportation agencies and nongovernment stakeholder groups.

Stuart Cohen, executive director of TransForm, a Bay Area transit advocacy nonprofit, cautions that widening two-lane Byron Highway could shift more traffic to the area and make it similar to Livermore or Fairfield, where traffic is gridlocked through those communities.

"There's a misunderstanding sometimes when looking at widening roads. It can't be looked at in isolation," Cohen said.

He's hopeful the studies will offer a thorough and honest evaluation.

Outreach to the public would start once there is clearer direction, likely in February or March of next year, Englemann said.

As with any large transportation project, the "herculean work" will be in funding construction of the project, Piepho said.

No money has been identified for building the project yet.

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