



November 1, 2022

Mr. Tony Tavares, Director California
Department of Transportation (Caltrans)
P.O. Box 942873
Sacramento, CA 94273-0001

Ms. Therese McMillan, Executive Director
Metropolitan Transportation Commission
Bay Area Metro Center
375 Beale Street, Suite 800
San Francisco, CA 94105-2066

Subject: Accelerate planning and construction of a Highway 37 elevated causeway as the “ultimate” project with near-term measures to address congestion and flood risk as initial phases of the “ultimate” project

Dear Director Tavares and Director McMillan,

On behalf of the City Council of the City of Novato, I write to urge a strong commitment to the accelerated planning and construction of the Highway 37 (SR 37) multi-modal, multi-benefit sea level rise adaptation project on a pile-supported causeway along the current SR 37 alignment (Planning and Environmental Linkages (PEL) Alternative 5). This “ultimate” elevated causeway project will enable timely flood risk and congestion management, along with wetland restoration, while also allowing the opportunity for rail to be adjacent.

Chronic traffic congestion and periodic flooding along this vital 21-mile commute and transportation corridor connecting Highway 101 in Marin County to Interstate 80 in Vallejo will only worsen as climate change continues to accelerate. Sitting just above sea level, flooding has caused the closure of Highway 37 for as many as 28 consecutive days (2017) and chronic congestion plagues commuter and commercial traffic daily – making near-term solutions an essential part of the long-term solution.

However, as CalTrans/MTC moves to finalize the EIR for a temporary, nearly \$500 million 10-mile freeway widening with 24-hour HOV lanes from Highway 121 at Sears Point in Sonoma County to Mare Island in Solano County as its preferred near-term solution, we want to express our serious concerns regarding the near-term proposal. We all agree near-term measures to address congestion and flooding are critical, but we respectfully urge that such projects should minimize adverse environmental impacts, maximize environmental benefits, such as wetland restoration, and align with the ultimate project to connect Marin, Sonoma, Napa, and Solano counties for future generations.

Moreover, depending on the ultimate cost, including public transit between Novato and Suisun City, such as an extension of SMART train service, coupled with the largest wetland restoration

project on the West Coast while also alleviating traffic congestion, would make the elevated causeway a “win-win-win” solution for future generations. We suggest SMART be involved as a stakeholder in the planning of the ultimate project.

The environmental community supports the “ultimate” project. The environmental benefits of the ultimate project are so compelling that regional, state and federal regulators may accelerate and simplify environmental reviews and permitting. In addition to qualifying for federal and state highway infrastructure funding that is currently available, the multiple benefits of the ultimate project and the opportunity to provide a national model for resiliency potentially open other funding sources, including rail, multi-modal, climate resiliency and ecosystem restoration funding.

The Novato City Council strongly urges Caltrans and MTC to conduct a thorough evaluation and technical analysis of the impact an “elevated causeway” would have on Highway 101. Because Highway 37 ends in the City of Novato, Highway 101 and the city’s roadways would likely be inordinately affected by any potential changes, and improvements to the Highway 37/Highway 101 interchange may be required.

The ultimate “elevated causeway” solution simultaneously responds to three aspects of the climate crisis, as outlined by the State Route 37 Baylands Group this summer:

- Adaptation, by providing a natural buffer against sea level rise for North Bay communities;
- Mitigation, by reducing atmospheric carbon dioxide through the blue carbon benefits of salt marshes; and
- Biodiversity: by expanding ecologically vital wetland habitat. Improving Highway 37 must be approached as a multi-benefit project that compliments and advances these critical objectives.

Near-term traffic relief improvements consistent with the ultimate project should be provided while the causeway is being planned and built. We all share the urgency that existing traffic issues for tens of thousands of commuters on the highway need to be addressed before the elevated causeway is completed. However, the proposed temporary freeway widening along the corridor, created with fill on sensitive wetlands, does not align with the long-term solution. It is our understanding that the proposed temporary freeway widening, potentially costing in excess of \$500 million once completed, would likely be overtopped by rising sea levels within 15 years and would need to be demolished for the “elevated causeway” to function.

We respectfully urge that CalTrans/MTC move forward with near-term alternatives that bring traffic relief faster, cheaper, and in ways that are consistent with the elevated causeway that everyone agrees is the ultimate solution. Insofar as this is an environmental infrastructure project, both near and long-term outcomes should include the following at an accelerated pace so that some of the benefits of the ultimate project can be realized more quickly and progress can continue while funding for future phases is secured:

- Congestion relief, potentially including a redesigned interchange at Highway 121;
- Reduced adverse environmental impacts, including mitigated use of fill during near-term project phases;
- Maximized environmental benefits, such as wetland preservation and restoration;
- Sea level rise adaptation and flood control; and
- Preservation of rail transit options, depending upon ultimate cost.

We have a unique alignment of financial, political and regulatory elements that can help it succeed right now.

Please let us know how we can help.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Eric Lucan', written in a cursive style.

Eric Lucan, Mayor
Novato City Council

Cc: Honorable Congressman Jared Huffman
Honorable Governor Gavin Newsom
Honorable State Senator, Mike McGuire
Marin County Board of Supervisors
Anne Richman, Exec. Director, Transportation Authority of Marin