

'Another slap in the face' : Tulare Highway 99 widening canceled — for now

By Joshua Yeager

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Plans to widen Highway 99 through Tulare and parts of Madera County have been scrapped — for now.

The California Department of Transportation announced plans to delete the projects in a 2020 draft report. The Tulare project would expand the 99 from four to six lanes — three on each side — between Prosperity Avenue and Avenue 200, near the International Agri-Center.

Local representatives are calling the DOT's decision "another slap in the face" to the Central Valley.

"It's very frustrating and goes to the whole idea of people need to ride more trains and mass transit, but that's just not realistic in every part of the state," said Kuyler Crocker, Tulare County Board of Supervisors' chairman.

Caltrans countered that it remains "heavily invested" in the Central Valley's highway infrastructure.

"We are moving ahead with nearly \$400 million in highway projects, including widenings along SR-46 (between Kern County and the Central Coast)," said Matt Roco, Caltrans spokesman.

He added that funding fluctuates from year-to-year, and that the Tulare widening would be up for consideration again in 2020.

Crocker said the 99 is among the most dangerous highways in the country and a major goods corridor throughout the Valley and state.

"We need more lanes to improve safety and ease congestion," he said. "Slower-moving cars and diesel trucks stuck in gridlock also doesn't help the Valley's air quality.

"It's only going to get worse."

Crocker noted that other 99-improvement projects between Tulare and Visalia will continue as planned, but important funding needed to design the Tulare widening was "swiped" at the last moment.

"It's not completely surprising. The state of California does things that are detrimental to the Central Valley all the time," he said. "(The project cancellations) are really troubling because it indicates that the state is moving away from highway expansion, when the 99 is only going to get more congested."

Money for the project comes from the state's Interregional Transportation Improvement Program, which includes a \$2.6 billion fund to improve transportation and goods movement across the state. The fund is in part derived from Senate Bill 1, the state's controversial gas tax passed in 2017 and upheld in a failed ballot measure last year.

County officials will attend a Tuesday hearing with the California Transportation Commission in Modesto to testify that the Tulare and Madera County projects would lead to "better traffic for the whole state."

"It's not just Tulare that benefits. It's the whole Valley working closely together to bring these projects to fruition," said Ted Smalley, executive director of the Tulare County Association of Governments. "Our citizens are going to Madera, and Madera citizens are going to Tulare."

Assemblyman Devon Mathis will join Smalley at this week's hearing to request the commission fully fund the deleted highway projects.

"The 99 is vital to the state of California and the nation for goods movement. It is unacceptable to delay improvements to the SR- 99 corridor," Mathis said.

Mathis pointed out that Caltrans District 6, which serves much of the Central Valley, worked to save costs on existing highway projects.

"Now, their reward is a recommendation by Caltrans headquarters to delete another project," Mathis said. "All of the proposed deletions have a distinct impact to the San Joaquin Valley."

Smalley and Crocker said Gov. Gavin Newsom isn't to blame, however.

"Gov. Newsom has made it very clear that he values Central Valley. These plans were likely drawn before (Newsom) was involved," Smalley said.

Last month, Newsom authored Executive Order N-19-19 which aims to leverage billions in the state's retirement investment portfolio to create a "Climate Investment Framework" to combat climate change and greenhouse-gas emissions.

"In the face of the White House's inaction on climate change, California is stepping up and leading the way," Newsom stated. "Our state is proof that you can reach some of the strongest climate goals in the world while also achieving record economic growth."

Newsom's order also says that "moving away from internal combustion engines is critical to reduce carbon emissions and to address major pollution issues across the state, especially in the Central Valley and Inland Empire."

Widening projects along 99 in Tulare County have been in progress since 2013.

Widening has been completed on approximately 18 miles of the highway stretching from the Fresno-Tulare County line to south of Caldwell Avenue near Visalia.

The 99 is a major land-based shipping route between the international market centers of San Francisco and Los Angeles. Highway 99 is one of the most heavily traveled non-interstate highways in the nation, according to the DOT.