

Handful weigh in on Echo Summit bridge plans

By Jessie Marchesseau

MEYERS – Seven miles west of South Lake Tahoe on Highway 50, the Echo Summit bridge is cracking, rusting and flaking apart. Caltrans has been working on a replacement/rehabilitation plan for the bridge since 2012.

A community open house at the California Conservation Corps office in Meyers on Thursday was designed to present the current project alternatives and take public comment.

Dozens of chairs sat empty during the presentation as only about a half dozen people were in attendance, including El Dorado County Supervisor Sue Novasel. Novasel said it was decided after Caltrans did a similar presentation on the project in South Lake Tahoe back in February that one should be conducted in Meyers since the community will be directly affected by any work on the highway. (The media was sent a press release about the May 21 event one day earlier.)



Caltrans plans to replace this Echo Summit bridge in 2019.
Photo/Provided

Project manager Clark Peri discussed the need for the project, showing photographs of the deteriorating bridge with its

rusting steel supports and spalling concrete. Built in 1939, the bridge is in what engineers consider advanced stages of deterioration, though is not in danger of actually collapsing anytime soon.

Caltrans has come up with six alternatives for the bridge project. The alternatives vary in scope, duration and type of road closure:

Alternative 1A

- Replace with 26-foot wide bridge
- Total 120-150 days in one construction season
- 60-90 days under full closure and 10-30 days under one-way traffic control

Alternative 1B

- Replace with 26-foot wide bridge
- Total 100-130 days in two construction seasons
- 20-50 days under full closure and 50-70 days under one-way traffic control

Alternative 2A

- Replace with 30.75-foot wide bridge
- Total 200-230 days in two construction seasons
- Under one-way traffic control (8-hour work shifts)

Alternative 2B

- Replace with 30.75 foot wide bridge
- Total 160-190 days in two construction seasons
- Under one-way traffic control (10-hour work shifts)

Alternative 3

- Rehabilitate existing bridge
- Total 150-180 days in two construction seasons
- 20-50 days under full closure and 90-120 days under one-way traffic control

Alternative 4

- Do nothing.

If the road were closed completely, vehicles would be detoured to highways 88 and 89 during that time. This is what happened when the highway was fully closed during the wall project in 2011, but it was only for a couple of weeks.

Novasel recalled the mudslide on Highway 50 in the 1990s when the road was closed for so long that businesses in Meyers were going out of business.

"We've seen how devastating it can be when it's closed," she said.

This is why she wants to start the conversation about this project early, get plenty of public input and plan well in advance. Right now the project is still in the environmental document and project report phase. Construction is not slated to begin until 2019.

During the comment portion of the meeting, attendees expressed a number of concerns. One resident who commutes to Sacramento for work was told commuter passes during road closures may be possible, though not guaranteed. When NDOT had Kingsbury Grade closed summer passes were issued on a limited basis.

Peri assured one attendee that his suggestion to build an alternate road through Echo Pass instead of detouring cars to Highway 88 would be discussed.

Another community member expressed his concerns about the area surrounding the highway not being geologically sound; he requested it be thoroughly studied before millions of dollars are invested into a bridge that would be completely demolished in the event of an earthquake. Again, Peri assured those in attendance there would be a thorough geological study completed, fault lines looked at and the findings taken into

account before any project designs are decided upon. This is standard for all such projects, he said.

Caltrans expects to have the environmental studies completed by this fall and anticipates another public meeting at that time. The highway officials hope to have a draft of the environmental impact report ready for public feedback by January of next year.

“The team takes all the comments they’ve collected along the way, along with their own studies, into consideration before they make the final decision,” Steve Nelson, public information officer for Caltrans, said.

To submit a comment on the project, email Suzanne Melim at Suzanne.melim@dot.ca.gov.