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Right path for Riverside County's Mid-County Parkway still in dispute

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From a bluff overlooking the Gavilan Plateau south of Lake Mathews, opponents of the proposed Mid-County Parkway linking San Jacinto and Corona point to where the parkway will bisect the rural area and cut off neighbors from one another.

But that's just one of the problems they have with the planned \$3 billion road, which would traverse rocky cliffs and sensitive areas south of the lake.

To the environmentalists and residents trying to keep the road out of the Gavilan Hills area -- or kill the project altogether -- the rocks, flowers and varmints are well worth saving.



Kurt Miller/The Press-Enterprise John Roth, left, and Cindy Ferry hike near Gavilan Hills, where a proposed parkway will be built. They oppose disturbing the rural area.

"Why are they even thinking about doing this?" asked Cindy Ferry, a longtime opponent of the planned parkway, which opponents insist is a freeway.

As a Thursday deadline for comments on the project's draft environmental report draws near, opponents are redoubling their efforts, drawing support from groups around Southern California and encouraging residents to comment.

Support might come from the county, which is proceeding with plans to widen nearby Cajalco Road, something that could change the parkway's alignment, some think.

Meanwhile residents and the Riverside County Transportation Commission are pressing ahead with what they call a much-needed road to handle the congestion crisis already crippling commuters. A problem that will only get worse as the county's population grows.

The comment period is important because it marks the last chance residents have to make statements before work starts on the final report.

The transportation commission's 1,000-plus-page draft report concluded the best route for the parkway is the so-called Alternative 9 that crosses a rural area through the Gavilan Hills area, notably onto the Gavilan plateau near Lake Mathews Drive.

The preferred alternative follows Ramona Expressway near San Jacinto to Placentia Avenue in Perris, then crosses agricultural and low-density properties west of Perris

before heading toward Temescal Canyon Road in Corona.



DEEP IMPACT

The negative impacts to residents are only one part of the problem, said Ileene Anderson, biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity office in Los Angeles. The plan directly affects 193.6 acres set aside for nature preservation and the home of four threatened or endangered species.

"This alignment really puts a big hit on those species," Anderson said during a tour of some of the preserved areas.

Other alignments cause as much or more damage, she conceded, but what should be called into question is the road's need.

George Hague, another critic of the road, said the parkway isn't needed if county officials stop condoning endless development and plan wisely.

"If you build this, you're adding to the problem," Hague said.

Ferry agreed.

“Once you put the freeway in, you won’t have a rural area,” she said.



From left, Rick Hines, Ileene Anderson, Cindy Ferry, Laurie Taylor and George Hague have a view of where a proposed parkway would jut to the right of Gavilan Peak in the background.

BEST CHOICE

Opposition is decidedly muted in other areas served by the proposed route.

Residents north of Lake Mathews -- where other possible routes were discussed -- have said despite the loss of some natural areas, the route is the best way to move traffic in the center of the county.

The officials who drafted the plan also defend the preferred route. Cathy Bechtel, project development director for the transportation commission, said the route was chosen because it impacts the least number of sensitive areas.

The road is also needed to meet increasing travel demands, Bechtel and others have said. Projections place Riverside County’s population approaching 3 million people

by 2030. With that many people, a route between Interstate 215 and Interstate 15 south of Highway 91 is necessary to handle the thousands of drivers, even if more commuters work in Riverside County.

Without the road, officials said, the county will be unable to handle the traffic demand.

While it’s regrettable to cut through any sensitive area, Bechtel said in November, the growth is forcing the transportation commission to respond, and they have chosen the best path.

OTHER OPTIONS

Because a final environmental report is not expected for about a year, adjustments to the plan can be made. A proposal discussed by Gavilan Hills residents, notably John Roth, calls for much of the parkway route to follow Cajalco Road.

Roth, a member of the county’s Planning Commission, stressed he is pursuing the change not as a commissioner but as a nearby resident.

Using Cajalco for a portion of the parkway had detractors earlier in the discussions but probably has more merit now, said Riverside County Transportation Director Juan Perez.

“We do think that would be worthwhile to study further,” he said.

Perez oversees county road projects and is not a member of the transportation commission, which is a state-created board with local commissioners.

The county will expand Cajalco Road to four lanes from I-215 west to Temescal Canyon Road in Corona. Widening Cajalco is already needed and Perez said the county

will proceed with the project at a cost of \$150 million to \$200 million. The work will also fix some of the deficiencies that made Cajalco a bad choice for the parkway route.

A widened Cajalco also could give transportation officials more time to plan a parkway -- and give them another option for where to put the parkway.

Bechtel said the middle portion of the 32-mile parkway near the Gavilan Hills area would be one of the last sections to be built.