

Olancha - Cartago 4 Lane Project

The California Department of Transportation is resolved to perpetrate an entirely unnecessary environmental and economic disaster near the Eastern Sierra community of Olancha. To date, Caltrans has completely ignored the voices of Inyo County and the local Owens Valley residents.

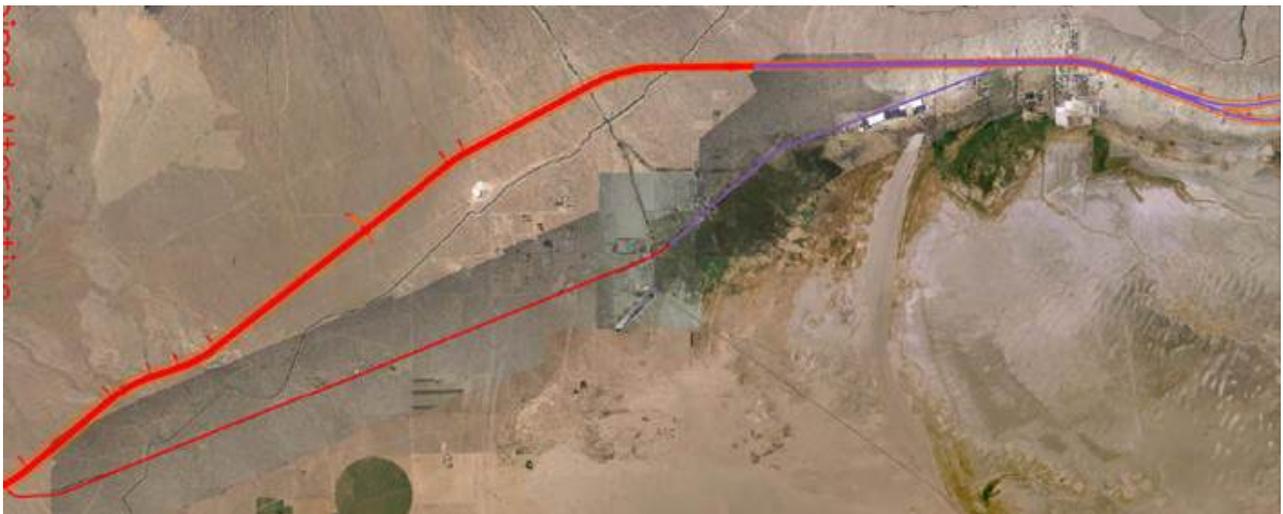
There has long been a plan to widen all of Federal Highway I-395 to 4-lanes in Inyo County. All that remains is a 12 mile stretch south of Olancha to north of Cartago.

Caltrans spent years and over \$5M to come up with several 'alternatives' for how/where to perform the expansion. One of the concepts (Alt 1) called for widening the highway along its current alignment, and others explored entirely new routes. Caltrans' documents cast each of the alternatives as viable, with none particularly standing out in terms of benefits or liabilities (despite obvious differences). See: www.dot.ca.gov/dist9/projects/olancha/docs/draft_olanacha-cartago_envir_doc.pdf

The Inyo Board of Supervisors expressed their support for Alt. 1, in keeping with an Inyo County General Plans goal of not allowing I-395 to bypass any community through the corridor. An overwhelming majority of Olancha/Cartago residents and business owners polled by Caltrans were also in favor of Alt. 1.

However, the Caltrans project staff recommended Alt. 3 to their District Manager, which would bypass Olancha with a new divided highway east of the aqueduct, rejoining the existing alignment in Cartago.

Then, Manager Tom Hallenbeck rejected all previous plans and generated his own, characterized as a 'simple' combination of Alt 3 and Alt. 4. See: http://www.dot.ca.gov/dist9/pr/2011_pr_jun11.pdf. This 'Hallenbeck Alternative' is similar to Alt. 3 except the bypass falls to the east of the aqueduct, largely on never developed BLM property. It leaves 'old' 395 in place to serve as an extension of Highway 190.



The thick red line indicates Olancha bypass path on BLM land. Thin red line is on original highway, which will remain in use.

After choosing this 'preferred alternative,' Caltrans submitted it for a Final Environmental Impact Report, which is expected to be complete in 2013. Caltrans desire is for a Negative Declaration to be reached.

The Hallenbeck Alternative was never submitted back to Inyo government or community for review and input, nor have any details of how it would actually be implemented been revealed. Caltrans stated they have no intent or obligation to provide any public forums or communications to the public until the Final EIR is completed.

Simply put, a new 163' wide highway that leaves the old highway in place and in use would be a wholly unnecessary environmental disaster (not to mention devastating to the economic future of Olancho).

According to Caltrans, a bypass will add 'about a mile' to the current length of I-395. Based on actual vehicle speeds on the existing highway, a bypass will add about a minute to a trip through Owens Valley. Using EPA figures and Caltrans statistics, a 1-mile elongation of I-395 will add over 2-1/2 million pounds of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere per year, due to vehicles burning at least 125,000 extra gallons of fuel.

The Inyo Local Transportation Commission had been resolved in their support of Alt. 1, potentially withholding funding it controls, until Caltrans Hallenbeck 'persuaded' Chairman Bob Kimball to accept Caltrans preference. After the recent January LTC meeting where this reversal was admitted, Mr. Kimball approached me apologetically and advised me the only way to counter Caltrans was through the environmental impact of their plan.

Others have suggested that Caltrans is already in violation of CEQA / NEPA, and could be blocked through legal action on several fronts. At this point, it seems that community and Inyo government protest can have no effect on Caltrans' momentum.

This is not a simple case of differences of opinion or matters of taste; Caltrans is pursuing a wholly unnecessary desecration of nature, and destruction of a community's livelihood. Unfortunately, it may be beyond the means of a grassroots effort to make things right. Please add your dissenting voice, resources, and support!

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