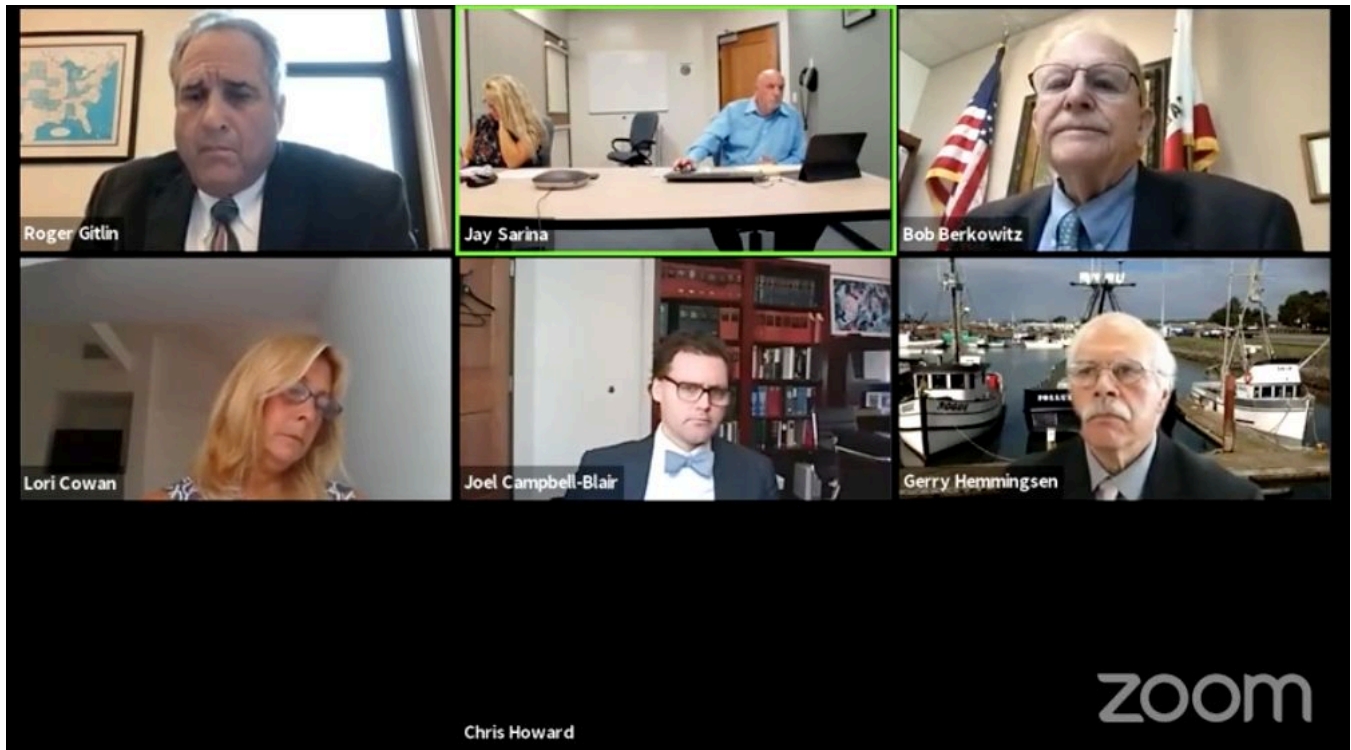


County supervisors' highway project discussion gets contentious

September 12, 2020



A stretch of unanimous support for a project to bring Highways 197 and 199 up to federal trucking standards came to end Tuesday when there was dissent among the County Board of Supervisors.

District 1 Supervisor Roger Gitlin expressed his concerns about a Del Norte Local Transportation Commission resolution that he said didn't contain an explanation from Caltrans to how the STAA 197/199 project would improve road safety.

Gitlin sought to table the resolution. When his motion was denied, Gitlin voted against it.

Supervisors Chris Howard and Gerry Hemmingsen rebuked Gitlin's comments, explaining the project has been a contentious issue for more than a decade.

Howard accused Gitlin of siding with conservation groups Friends of Del Norte, the Environmental Protection Information Center (EPIC) and the Center for Biological Diversity, referring the groups' injunction in 2014 that halted the project's construction.

“You’re sitting here supporting EPIC, Friends of Del Norte, and you’re also supporting the Center for Biological Diversity, groups you’ve spoken adamantly against in the last decade,” Howard said.

Gitlin countered that Howard should recuse himself as his employer, Alexandre Eco Dairy, is among a list of businesses supporting the project.

Gitlin added that while the Local Transportation Commission’s resolution on the STAA 197/199 project would be an economic benefit to Del Norte County, Walmart wasn’t on the list of supporters.

“They’re probably the biggest importer of freight coming in and they’re not in support,” Gitlin said. “They say there’s no economic benefit in moving to larger trucks for their purposes.”

Gitlin said trucks with a maximum length of 65 feet are currently allowed on Highways 197 and 199, but bringing the road to STAA standards will allow trucks with 75-foot trailers.

The Board of Supervisors received the Local Transportation Commission’s resolution about three weeks after a federal judge in San Francisco granted the agency intervenor status in ongoing litigation in the STAA 197/199 project.

The \$34 million project would:

- Widen three curves on U.S. 199
- Replace a 96-year-old bridge.
- Widen two curves on State Route 197 near Ruby Van Deventer County Park.

According to the staff report submitted to the Board of Supervisors, Caltrans’ goal is to make the project safer for trucks meeting the 1982 Surface Transportation Assistance Act (STAA) standard.

The Crescent City Harbor District Board of Commissioners and the Del Norte Unified School District Board of Trustees have already voted unanimously to support the project.

The project has been paid for with state and federal dollars since 2008.

“The basis for the intervenor status is that elected officials who are elected by the public, and not the litigants,” said Local Transportation Commission Executive Director Tamera Leighton in the staff report, “are the representatives of the public.”

By contrast, Friends of Del Norte representatives have argued the STAA 197/199 project would make the corridor more dangerous, not less. In a Tuesday Op-Ed on the Wild Rivers Outpost, Friends of Del Norte representatives stated the proposed improvements include widening several areas of the road by 12 inches instead of 48 inches.

“Friends of Del Norte are not opposed to safety improvements on Highways 199 and 197. Friends of Del Norte are opposed to the funding source and its requisite allowance of STAA trucks and the concurrent repercussions of greater numbers of large trucks,” the Friends of Del Norte Op-Ed reads.

Hemmingsen urged Del Norte County residents seeking more information about the STAA 197/199 project, to go to the Caltrans website.