

Last Chance Grade project inching forward

November 26, 2020



Long-awaited plans to move the Last Chance Grade roadway for Highway 101 are moving forward, but a final solution is still likely a decade or longer away.

During a town hall on the Last Chance Grade held last week, elected officials and representatives of the California Department of Transportation updated the progress on the project. While things are moving forward steadily, there is still a lot of work to do.

Last Chance Grade is a three-mile section of Highway 101 between Klamath and Crescent City that is, and has been for years, slowly sliding into the ocean. The road is currently being maintained just enough for traffic to continue, but residents are desperate for other solutions so as not to risk their primary road closing.

Families from Klamath commute to Crescent City weekly, even daily, for groceries, school, work and more. Without Highway 101 connecting them, the drive from Klamath to Crescent City could take upwards of six hours, according to State Sen. Mike McGuire.

McGuire hosted the town hall meeting and was joined by Congressman Jared Huffman, State Assemblyman Jim Wood, representatives from Del Norte County and Crescent City as well as CalTrans leaders working on the project.

McGuire said recent funding will allow the geotechnical and environmental studies to move forward with a deadline of having the studies completed by 2026. Even with the 2026 deadline, McGuire said all parties involved hope to cut a year or two off to make progress quicker.

“That has allowed us to move forward on the geotechnical studies,” McGuire said. “CalTrans is on time for their geotechnical studies.”

Huffman joined the meeting briefly and guaranteed the project would get done.

“This is not something we like to do, not something we hope to do,” Huffman said. “It’s something we have to do, and we will do. I guarantee it.”

Huffman said the impacted groups working together has made progress possible.

“Local elected officials, tribes, conservationists, landowners, public agencies — this doesn’t happen all the time,” he said. “We need to do it right, and we know we’re working in very sensitive areas. I can tell you, you will always have 100 percent support from myself and my staff.”

Wood said he is also pleased with the progress being made.

“It is such an important project, a lifeline for this city to the rest of the world essentially,” Wood said. “It needs to be done right, but it needs to be done as quickly as we can. I would like to see it be done tomorrow, but the complexity of this project is astounding.”

CalTrans District 1 Director Matthew Brady said from his perspective there are two ongoing projects related to Last Chance Grade. The first is to keep the existing stretch of Highway 101 open while working to find a permanent, inland solution.

“The people of Del Norte and the surrounding region have waited a long time to see a long-term solution at Last Chance Grade,” Brady said.

Brady said CalTrans recently secured \$16 million in funding to shore up the existing roadway. He said work at the site will take up to a year and will require nightly closures for at least a week. When that will happen has not been decided.

“We are on schedule, but we know there is a lot of work in front of us,” Brady said. “We are looking at all, and I want to emphasize all, of the ways to reduce the scheduled time while complying with environmental laws and regulations.”

Del Norte County Supervisor Bob Berkowitz said people who live in his county must see a solution at Last Chance Grade. He said anything else would be catastrophic.

“If and when this road fails, it’s estimated it would be a 320-mile detour going from Crescent City to Eureka,” Berkowitz said. “So, this brings us to today, some far-sighted legislators have fought long and hard to get us to this point. Today, we take more steps on a journey to get a replacement for Last Chance Grade.”

Crescent City Mayor Blake Inscore said the road is vital for his city.

“We believe we will see this done, we have to see this done,” Inscore said. “Students need this road to go to school, people need this road to go to work. We’ve got to stay the course, and we’ve got to work together. You can’t say enough about what CalTrans has done. They’re committed that no matter what, this road will stay open.”

Jaime Matteoli, an engineer with CalTrans, tried to explain the current problem and the challenges in finding a permanent solution.

He said the current three-mile stretch overseeing the ocean has four spots when there are steady landslides under the road. CalTrans is doing everything it can to stop the slides.

Moving ahead with a new project, he said there are three major challenges:

- 1 – Environmental sensitivity and complexity in the area
- 2 – Maintaining partnerships with local shareholders
- 3 – Understanding the geology.

Most of the work to date has been related to the geology. He explained CalTrans has bored down 150 feet in many locations to get an idea of what is under the ground, measuring movement and monitoring groundwater.

Moving forward, he said there are three major risks, the biggest being potential environmental litigation. A lawsuit could stop the project for years, even if the suit were not successful.

Matteoli said work at Last Chance Grade has escalated quickly since 2015, moving from study groups to actual work on the ground in the search for a new route.

Dina Potter, another engineer working on the project, said moving forward there is still a lot to do.

In 2021, experts will analyze the geotechnical data and try to narrow the final route to no more than 400 acres. By narrowing the route, it will limit environmental studies that need to be done.

The schedule moving forward shows environmental clearance by 2026 with four years then set aside to get permits, purchase the needed land and design the road. Construction would then start in 2031.

“Myself and the entire team feel your sense of urgency,” Potter said. “We are committed to accelerating our work any way we can.”

McGuire echoed that sentiment.

“There is a constant push to be able to cut time off by the 2026 date for the environmental deadline,” he said.
“This project is on time and on budget.”