

## Solution in the works for Last Chance Grade

July 22, 2022



A “unified front” of elected public officials, finance administrators, project engineers, scientists and public land managers provided project updates for Del Norte County’s notorious Last Chance Grade along Highway 101 between Crescent City and Klamath.

Sponsored and organized by State Senator Mike McGuire, this annual progress report was presented in a livestream Town Hall format last Tuesday, July 12, and gave the public an opportunity to question the experts.

The biggest news, according to Sen. McGuire, is that the Last Chance Grade project is “on time and on budget.” In addition, the project has received \$50 million in funding that has allowed the project to undergo geotechnical, environmental and engineering studies.

McGuire stated that his number one goal is to present a unified front “so we can start moving dirt as soon as possible.”

Congressman Jared Huffman agreed, stating that “holding everyone together” will help to “avoid conflict, litigation and delay.” With passage of last year’s Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill, “this is the best time to move forward,” Congressman Huffman said. “We are never going to have more resources than we do right now.”

Huffman added that, among transportation infrastructure projects, “there is no higher priority” than the Last Chance Grade project. Once a consensus is reached, the project will move to environmental review, the

permitting phase, project funding, and construction.

State Assemblyman Jim Wood said the project represents “safe, reliable travel north and south, with reduced maintenance costs and road closures.”

CalTrans District 1 Deputy Director Richard Mullen, a Yurok tribal member, said that even though Last Chance Grade is a “highly difficult, complex and sensitive project,” the project is on track. It is currently the “highest level priority for CalTrans.”

Dep. Director Mullen expects two-way traffic to open “early 2023,” thereby avoiding the often-lengthy delays from single-lane one-way traffic while roadwork continues.

Del Norte County Board of Supervisors Chair Gerry Hemmingsen said completing the improvements to Last Chance Grade is critical. “Without it, we would not survive.” He said, “CalTrans stepped up big,” addressing the concerns of those “afraid to fall into the ocean and have a mountain fall on top of us.”

Fellow Supervisor Susan Masden, whose District 5 covers the project area, said that her constituents are concerned that the highway project “is not happening fast enough.” Residents of District 5 “depend on having timely access to emergency services” that have been delayed by road closures. “Medical appointments,” customer access to businesses, and business access to the “services they need” depend on the completion of this project.

CalTrans Project Manager Jaime Matteoli said this project involves “two jobs: keeping the highway open and safe, and finding a long term solution.” The February 2021 landslide has presented a “major challenge” to CalTrans. “Environmental sensitivity, maintaining partnerships and complex geology.”

The number of potential alternative routes has dropped from seven to just two.

Alternative F will move the alignment of the highway inland eastward to minimize the visual impact from the California Coastal Trail. Alternative F includes construction of a 6,000-ft. long “single bore” two-way tunnel that will burrow under the sensitive giant redwood grove area, to leave the surface undisturbed. This route will also allow construction of a shorter and less costly bridge. It is estimated that the tunnel will have a life expectancy of 75 years. The projected cost of Alternative F is \$1.3 billion.

Alternative X will realign the highway on nearly the same alignment as Highway 101, but with fewer curves and wider shoulders. The realigned highway will be protected from further landslides from a single multi-stepped retaining wall in critical landslide areas. The projected cost of Alternative X is \$500 million.

Construction of Alternative X will have greater impact on the public, as the improvements closely parallel the existing highway, while Alternative F improvements are made some distance away, with road closures required to move equipment and connect the old highway to the new.

Experts anticipate that selection of the final alternative will occur in 2024, with the final environmental documentation completed in 2025.

Assemblyman Woods said that, while fuel prices are high in Del Norte County, local residents pay less in fuel taxes that they receive in benefits from the state. The reason: many Del Norte County residents buy their fuel in Oregon.

A Federal Highway Administration representative said that \$100 million in federal money is available for emergencies, such as another landslide. Senator McGuire added that, “If there’s a catastrophic event, such as a mudslide, the state will spend whatever it takes to get the route operational, and will move on it within hours of the event.”

Some concerns raised about the Alternative F tunnel option include concerns about tunnel safety. The panel of experts assured the public that “ventilation, fire and evacuation” are part of the project design. There will be a pressurized footpath corridor to provide an escape route should the tunnel be closed off.

Members of the community asked, “Why can’t existing surface roads be substituted for Highway 101 in the landslide area?” The answer: Surface roads “are not designed for highway speed.”

Another question was, “Why is an expensive tunnel alternative being considered when it would be less costly to reroute Highway 101 much further to the east, away from the slide area?” Answer: “The tunnel is the least expensive alternative that avoids a landslide. A new route further inland would require the removal and relocation of 5 to 6 million cubic yards of materials onto sensitive forested areas.”

And the one question on everybody’s mind: “Why is this project taking so long?” Answer: The project is subject to complex state and federal environmental laws. There are complex geologic factors, as well as natural and culturally sensitive areas.