

Talks on Highway 37's future underway as sea-level threat looms



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For generations, the 21-mile route linking Marin County and Vallejo has been essential for commuters and travelers. Now Highway 37 has become something more — a centerpiece in a growing debate on how the Bay Area and California should respond to climate change and when politicians should bite the bullet to spend the billions of dollars needed to deal with it.

Caltrans is studying a plan to widen a traffic-prone, 10-mile stretch of the highway at a cost of nearly half a billion dollars while it comes up with a longer-term fix. But some advocates say they should skip that step while significant funding is available and do what all parties agree will eventually need to be done by elevating the road.

“The ultimate project achieves these two goals,” said Warner Chabot, executive director of the San Francisco Estuary Institute, a nonprofit research group in Richmond. “It produces the largest climate adaptation, sea-level rise and wetlands restoration project on the west coast of North America, and it also solves the intolerable traffic congestion and safety issues with a nature-based solution that meets the equity needs of thousands of commuters. That’s the ultimate magic of the elevated causeway.”

The problem is finding the estimated \$6 billion to \$8 billion needed to build the elevated causeway before sea-level rise begins to regularly inundate and cut off the road by 2040, as projected by Caltrans. Originally opened as a toll road in 1928 in an area once underwater before settlers diked and drained the San Francisco Bay wetlands, the highway now experiences flooding that has forced road closures during high tides and storms.

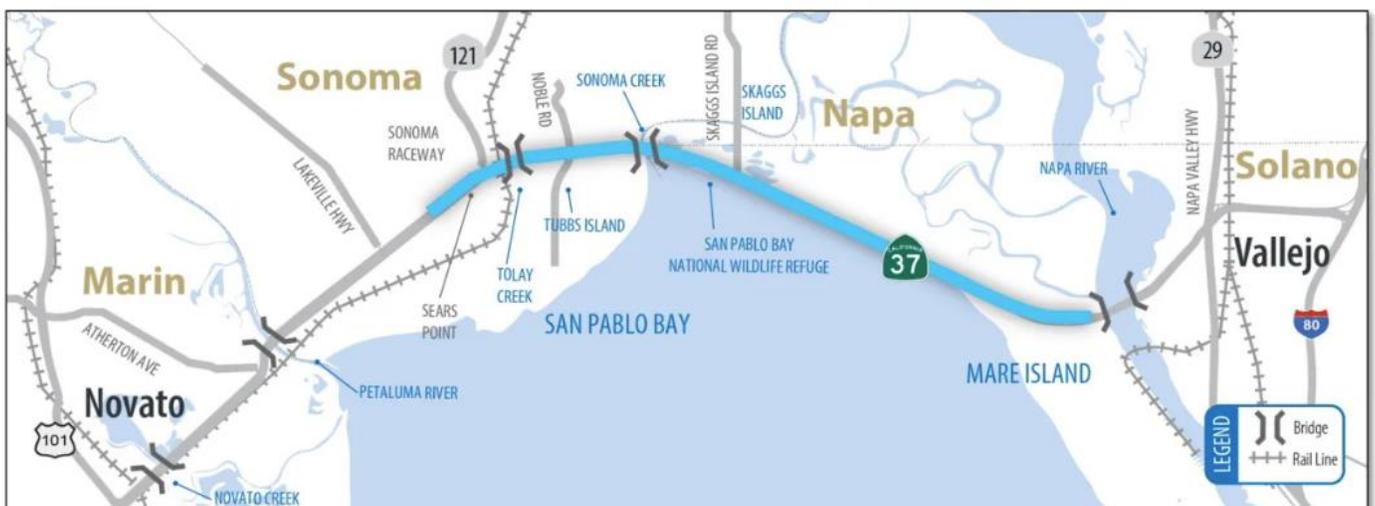
Advocates for the elevated highway say there is a window of opportunity that might not reopen with a \$100 billion state budget surplus and the recently passed \$1 trillion federal infrastructure bill. “If you keep kicking the can down the road, which they’ve been doing for decades now, it’s just going to cost more with inflation,” said Ariana Rickard, public policy and funding manager with the Sonoma Land Trust, a nonprofit conservation group. “And we just don’t know if we’re going to have another historic budget surplus. And then where is the money going to come from when it’s flooded?”

A group of Bay Area state legislators has called on Gov. Gavin Newsom and legislative leaders to set aside \$6 billion to begin planning and building the Highway 37 fixes. The Legislature returned from its summer recess on Monday. Officials from Caltrans and other project partners such as the Metropolitan Transportation Commission — the Bay Area’s transportation financing and planning agency — are considering an interim project to widen 10 miles of highway from Sears Point in Sonoma County to Mare Island from two lanes to up to four, adding a carpool lane in each direction.

The 10-mile bottleneck can add nearly 70 minutes of extra travel time during peak morning and commute hours, according to Caltrans. There is no transit service along the corridor. The Metropolitan Transportation Commission estimates that the delays result in nearly \$85 million in economic losses each year. Caltrans spokesman Bart Ney said travel times during peak hours are forecast to increase to five times the current level by 2045 if the highway is not widened.

The estimated \$430 million project would require thousands of truckloads of fill to be placed on protected wetlands to expand the highway berm. Caltrans is set to complete an [environmental review](#) of the project in the coming months with plans to begin construction by 2025 and open the new lanes by 2026.

Rebecca Long, legislative affairs director with the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, said all of the project partners agree that Highway 37 will need to be replaced or relocated before 2040. However, she said this massive project still has to undergo extensive study and environmental review before a final design is recommended, not to mention securing the estimated \$6 billion to build it. Caltrans estimates the buildout could take two decades or more to complete. “That funding is going to have to come from D.C., Sacramento, and it’s going to be competing against all the other climate-resilient projects nationwide,” Long said. “It’s not realistic to think we can get all those funds within the next couple of years. We don’t think it’s acceptable and our Bay Area delegation members in Sacramento are not comfortable basically telling their constituents that, sorry you have to put up with unbreakable traffic conditions for the next 10 years.”



The Highway 37 improvement project extends from Sears Point to Mare Island.

(CA Depart. of Transportation)

A four-lane highway would reduce travel time during peak congestion from 26 to 30 minutes and is estimated to reduce crashes by 14%, according to the commission. To help pay for both the widening and eventual long-term fix, Caltrans and project partners are proposing to begin charging tolls after the widening project is completed. The tolls would also be used to provide matching funds to obtain up to \$250 million in state and federal grants. The Legislature is considering a bill by state Sen. Bill Dodd, D-Napa, that would charge at least a \$1 toll but no more than tolls for two-axle vehicles on the state-owned bridges in the Bay Area, not including the Bay Bridge. The state bridge tolls are \$7 but will increase to \$8 in January 2025. Dodd could not be reached for comment.

While state agencies say the widened highway would eventually be removed in favor of an elevated causeway, U.S. Rep. Jared Huffman, whose district spans the northern coast, said that statement “doesn’t pass the straight-face test.” “No one is going to remove a \$500 million new highway 15 years after it’s built,” said Huffman, a Democrat who lives in San Rafael. “If you do this project as they have proposed it, you will never get the causeway, you will never have this wetland complex restored, you will never get the multiple benefits that everybody likes about the ultimate project. We just have to be honest about that.”

Huffman said he is urging state agencies to shift priorities to building the causeway, which he said could help the project compete for federal grants. However, he said that there appears to be reluctance by state agencies to take on these larger projects. “A lot of our transportation planners have seen what’s happened to high-speed rail and other projects and there is certain defeatism and skepticism that says you can’t do really big bold projects anymore,” Huffman said. “So they sort of dust off the playbook from the 1970s and try to widen the freeway.”

Long said the widening project would work to include other environmental benefits such as widening the Tolay Creek Bridge to allow for more tidal influence that can help build up wetlands and allow them to migrate as ocean waters rise. “Without the interim project bringing transportation funds to the table, there are no resources to do that,” she said.

District 10 Assemblyman Marc Levine, who represents Marin and southern Sonoma County, was among the Bay Area legislators who called for the state to allocate \$6 billion to the long-term project. While he said the highway widening is not the right fix for Highway 37 in the long term, he said there is still far more work to be done on the elevated highway proposal before it is ready for funding.

“I don’t think that the planning and resources are there to do the big dream plan in the near term to solve what is a huge problem for thousands of commuters every day,” said Levine, a Democrat who lives in Greenbrae.

State Sen. Mike McGuire, whose district includes Marin and the northern coast, said the state alone would not be able to pay for the elevated causeway. He said negotiations between local, state and federal officials is ongoing, but he stopped short of saying what project he thinks should be prioritized. “The bottom line is this. North Bay commuters have been suffering for too long,” said McGuire, a Democrat who lives in Healdsburg. “Year after year they’re sitting through one of the worst commutes in the entire Bay Area and it’s no longer acceptable. North Bay commuters deserve solutions, and that’s what we’re working through right now.”

Environmental agencies and organizations see the causeway project as a way to allow for as many as 20,000 acres of wetlands to be restored. San Francisco Bay shrank considerably after the Gold Rush as settlers diked and drained wetlands to make way for roads, agricultural fields and development. A regional goal to restore about 100,000 of the estimated 200,000 acres of lost wetlands has been underway since the late 1990s, with more than half that goal completed.

About 82% of the San Pablo Bay wetlands that Highway 37 transects were lost to development and drainage. However, this habitat also is one of the least developed areas along the bay, making it a prize location to complete the restoration goal, said Rickard of the Sonoma Land Trust. “It’s the largest and best opportunity in the Bay Area to restore this landscape-scale tidal ecosystem,” Rickard said.

Widening the highway would require the state to get approval from regulators to acquire and dump significant amounts of sediment on state and federally protected wetlands, such as the San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge and Napa-Sonoma Marshes Wildlife Area. These wetlands that are home to endangered species such as the Ridgway’s rail and salt marsh harvest mouse.

Anne Morkill, who managed the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge Complex from 2012 to 2020, questioned whether the widening project would be able to receive approvals in time for construction in 2025, if at all. The widening project would require the acquisition of protected property and the permanent removal of wetland habitat. As a result, the state would have to create new wetlands elsewhere to make up for the losses, but Morkill said there are not many areas remaining that are not already impacted. “The idea of bringing in fill, I can’t imagine it could ever be permitted and certainly not in a timely manner because of the mitigation that would be required,” she said. “You’re talking about highly sensitive habitats and species.”

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service did not respond to requests for comment. Craig Weightman, habitat conservation program manager for the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, said the agency has been engaged in discussions with the project leaders. He said that Caltrans’ goal to start construction in 2025 could be possible with “a straightforward, well-planned, and coordinated project,” though that will be determined by what the final design would look like.

Another concern with the widening project is that it would compete for sediment that is used in wetland projects throughout the bay, said Christina Toms, a scientist with the San Francisco Bay Water Quality Control Board. “It’s challenging finding clean dirt, and it’s expensive,” Toms said. “It’s expensive to source, expensive to haul. There is a lot of competing needs for this material throughout the region.”

By elevating the highway and eventually removing the berm, the project would essentially self-mitigate any impacts caused by building the causeway by allowing the wetlands to reconnect with the tides, Toms said. Restoration organizations are working to restore as much wetland habitat as possible before 2030 before rising oceans threaten to drown them.

By removing the highway, the wetlands will be able to migrate northward and provide more flood protections, Toms said. “The highway is kind of a barrier to what we call the strip marsh on the bay,” she said. “The highway in its current configuration makes it impossible for that strip marsh to migrate inland. That is going to be an important part of the story in the North Bay as it responds to climate change.”



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