

*The following Coastal Voices editorial appeared in The Del Norte Triplicate July 1, 2014.*

## **Is status quo on Highway 199 worth the risk?**

Improvements to Highway 199 have been a top priority for the Del Norte community for over twenty years. The improvements will remove thirty-two year old restrictions on commercial truck traffic, improve public safety, and encourage economic development. It has taken the widespread and unwavering support of elected officials and the Del Norte Local Transportation Commission to see these improvements implemented, and they were tantalizingly close to becoming a reality this past spring when ground was broken on the Middle Fork Smith River Bridge.

The recent injunction on the bridge project, in conjunction with an editorial piece written in the Triplicate by the Friends of Del Norte, has led to some mischaracterizations about the project. Some of these discrepancies are a simple misunderstanding about the project, while others are a slanted view of the injunction and the environmental process. Although not formally named in the lawsuit, the Del Norte Local Transportation Commission has a vested interest in defending the project and has voted to retain council to be an advocate and a voice for the community in the ongoing lawsuit.

Opponents of the project have framed their argument around alleged environmental and economic indifference to Coho Salmon habitat and a marginal improvement to traffic safety. This argument is an oversimplification of the complex issues facing Del Norte County as we balance our economic and social development with our responsibilities as environmental stewards. The Commission understands that the Smith River is a treasured resource to the community and takes the stewardship of its water as a universal ethic. It is because of this conviction that the Commission has been proactive in its planning efforts to minimize impacts to the river while improving the safety of our regional transportation network and promoting a diverse and prosperous economy.

While the purpose of the project is to allow access on Highway 199 and State Route 197 for commercial vehicles, the region will benefit from the project by having safer roadways that provide better conditions for all travelers. Many residents and community members can recount accidents and “near misses” in the Narrows where tight curves and narrow lanes can limit a driver’s options when faced with oncoming traffic. Safety enhancements with the project will include wider lanes and shoulders, longer radius curves, and improved sight distances to provide a roadway that is easier to maneuver for all users. It will also replace an 89-year old bridge that was built with a 50-year design life.

These improvements were carefully identified and designed to have the smallest impact to the environment as possible while meeting the community’s needs and the project’s objectives. While improved safety is an additional benefit at these locations, the project was never intended to be a universal fix for all issues on the corridor. Applying current Caltrans standards along the entire length of Highway 199 and State Route 197 would be cost prohibitive and result in disproportionate environmental impacts that all parties are trying to avoid. The improvements that Caltrans has prioritized with this project will remove commercial trucking restrictions,

replace an aging bridge, and increase safety resulting in comparable conditions to those found on Highway 101 and 299.

Unfortunately the current condition of these roads has defined us as a community. When asked about Crescent City and North Coast region, members of the recreational vehicle community will talk about how beautiful the area is but how they avoid it because of the roads. One well-traveled member of the community likened Highway 199 to the roads in Mexico, but noted that the roads in Mexico are better. Beyond the economic benefit of a direct trucking route that meets a 32-year-old standard from Interstate 5 to Crescent City, this project has an opportunity to increase our safety, build on the tourism potential of the region, and highlight our necessary and beautiful natural resources.

There is a lot at stake for the community with the current injunction. There are very few ways to fund large projects in a rural county like Del Norte, which has required the Commission to commit both current and future funding opportunities to this project. The injunction on the Middle Fork Smith River Bridge has halted work on all project improvements to Highway 199 and State Route 197, and could have a domino effect that jeopardizes over \$34 million in past, present and future transportation funding for the Del Norte region. This project remains a top priority for the Commission, which has tied up 8 to 10 years of funding to see these improvements through to construction. This is funding that will not be recouped by the region if certain project deadlines are not met.

The Commission remains committed to the project, and will dutifully keep the community informed on the status of the litigation. For more information on the project, or to sign up for project updates, please visit the Del Norte Local Transportation Commission's website.

Michael Sullivan, Chair  
Del Norte Local Transportation Commission