

Coastal Voices by Tamera Leighton, Executive Director, Del Norte Local Transportation Commission

**Opinion or False Statement? The facts about safety on US Highway 199.**

My opinion is that there is a difference between an opinion and a false statement. “We are a travel destination,” is my opinion. “The design is so deficient that there are absolutely no improvements proposed between Hiouchi and Gasquet, which has some of the most accident-prone areas,” is a false statement.

On September 9, 2014 the Del Norte Triplicate printed a Coastal Voices column that was treated as an opinion but was actually a misrepresentation of fact. While it's unreasonable to believe that The Triplicate can fact check everything, my opinion is that they have an obligation to basic fact checking.

*Staff Analysis presented to The Del Norte Triplicate and Del Norte Local Transportation Commission on November 12, 2014.*

Friends of Del Norte president Don Gillespie submitted information to the Del Norte Triplicate that was published on September 9, 2014. There are numerous factual errors. I requested the 10-Year Collision Analysis from Caltrans to substantiate my concerns that Mr. Gillespie, President, Friends of Del Norte is providing false information to the public regarding safety on the Highway 197/199 corridor. (The 10-year collision analysis was attached and can be found at [www.dnltc.org](http://www.dnltc.org).)

Friends of Del Norte Claim: *“The design is so deficient that there are absolutely no improvements proposed between Hiouchi and Gasquet, which has some of the most accident-prone areas.”*

Fact: There are 10 projects that have either recently been completed or are planned to be constructed within this segment and all of these projects are expected to reduce the frequency of collisions involving all types of vehicles within this segment.

Fact: DNLTC's Patrick Creek project has a fatal collision rate that is 5.4 times greater than the statewide average for similar facilities while the section of Highway 199 between Hiouchi and Gasquet has a fatal collision rate of 1.7 times the statewide average for similar highway facilities. Even though there is an alarmingly higher fatality rate within DNLTC's Patrick Creek project area, Friends of Del Norte, Ted Sousa and their partners are delaying all improvements through court action.

Friends of Del Norte Claim: *“Our local elected leaders don't want to discuss the safety issues raised.”*

Fact: Del Norte Local Transportation Commission is concerned with the facts, and rather than publishing unsubstantiated claims, they have requested and received a 10-year collision analysis for the sections of highway addressed by the Safe STAA Access projects. While STAA access is a primary goal for the corridor, DNTLC is alarmed at the current fatality rate in the Patrick Creek project area and for the entire corridor. The Safe STAA projects will increase safety for all drivers and there are no other improvements at the STAA project locations at this time.

Friends of Del Norte Claim: *“Old and unsafe bridges are being replaced as a matter of Caltrans policy throughout California.”*

Fact: The Middle Fork Smith River Bridge was built in 1925. Before DNLTC’s involvement, there were no plans to replace this bridge. This is because there is far more need than funding in the State for transportation infrastructure. The recently published Statewide Needs Assessment ([http://www.catc.ca.gov/reports/2011Reports/2011\\_Needs\\_Assessment\\_updated.pdf](http://www.catc.ca.gov/reports/2011Reports/2011_Needs_Assessment_updated.pdf)) shows the total cost of all system preservation projects during the ten-year study period is nearly \$341 billion while the total estimated revenue from all sources is \$242 billion for the same 10 years. When considering system management and expansion needs in addition to system preservation, only 49% of known and necessary projects will be funded.

Friends of Del Norte Claim: *“The Hiouchi Bridge, the Hardscrabble Creek Bridge and Stevens Bridge (on South Fork Road) replacements did not require STAA truck funding. The old Middle Fork Bridge can also be replaced without STAA funding.”*

Fact: There is no STAA funding. The Friends of Del Norte’s inference that there is a special funding source is false.

Fact: All three bridges referenced by Friends of Del Norte meet STAA truck access requirements, even Steven Memorial Bridge which is on South Fork Road – a road that is not considered a main transportation corridor and that essentially ends at the off-grid community of Big Flat.

Fact: The old Middle Fork Smith Bridge is in the top 1% of oldest bridges on the State Highway System, and the narrowest bridge on US Highway 199 at 25 feet. The next narrowest bridge is 34 feet, a difference of 9 feet. The project will add some maneuvering room resulting in a more forgiving roadway.

Friends of Del Norte Claim: *“The present temporary court injunction to stop construction can work to give us pause to discuss these important safety issues.”*

Fact: The word “safety” does not appear a single time in the 16-page order granting preliminary injunction on the Patrick Creek project. The injunction is primarily about procedural requirements:

“Our circuit has held that the ESA’s (Endangered Species Act) procedural requirements must be strictly enforced,” says the order.

Conclusion: The alleged safety issues and other information presented by the Friends of Del Norte about the Safe STAA Access projects and the Patrick Creek project are fully unsupported by fact.