

Notice of Preparation of a Draft Environmental Impact Report for the Interstate 5 Improvement Project from San Diego County Line to Avenida Pico

The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), in cooperation with the Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA), is issuing this Notice of Preparation (NOP) for a project-level Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the Interstate 5 (I-5) Improvement Project from the San Diego County Line to Avenida Pico (Proposed Project) to initiate scoping and solicit input. Caltrans is the lead agency under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and is preparing an EIR in accordance with CEQA and an Environmental Assessment (EA) in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) for the Proposed Project. The environmental document will be prepared as a joint document pursuant to CEQA and NEPA. This is the Caltrans Project Approval and Environmental Document (PA&ED) phase for this Project.

Pursuant to CEQA, Caltrans is distributing this NOP and initiating this early consultation/scoping to notify the responsible agencies, trustee agencies, the Office of Planning and Research, the County Clerk and involved federal agencies that an EIR/EA is being prepared. The purpose is to solicit guidance from those agencies on the scope and content regarding potential significant environmental issues, reasonable alternatives, and reasonable mitigation measures that should be discussed in the EIR/EA. An Initial Study has not been prepared for the proposed project; therefore, is not attached to this NOP.

Caltrans proposes to add a high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lane in both directions from the San Diego County Line to the I-5/Avenida Pico interchange in the City of San Clemente. This project would also reestablish existing auxiliary lanes, widen existing undercrossings, and replace two existing overcrossings to accommodate the proposed HOV lanes.

Project Location

The Proposed Project is on I-5 from the San Diego County Line (11-SD-5, Postmile [PM] 71.0) to the I-5/Avenida Pico interchange (12-ORA-5, PM 3.4) in the City of San Clemente (refer to Project Location Map, Figure 1). The project limits are within the City of San Clemente in Orange County and within unincorporated San Diego County.

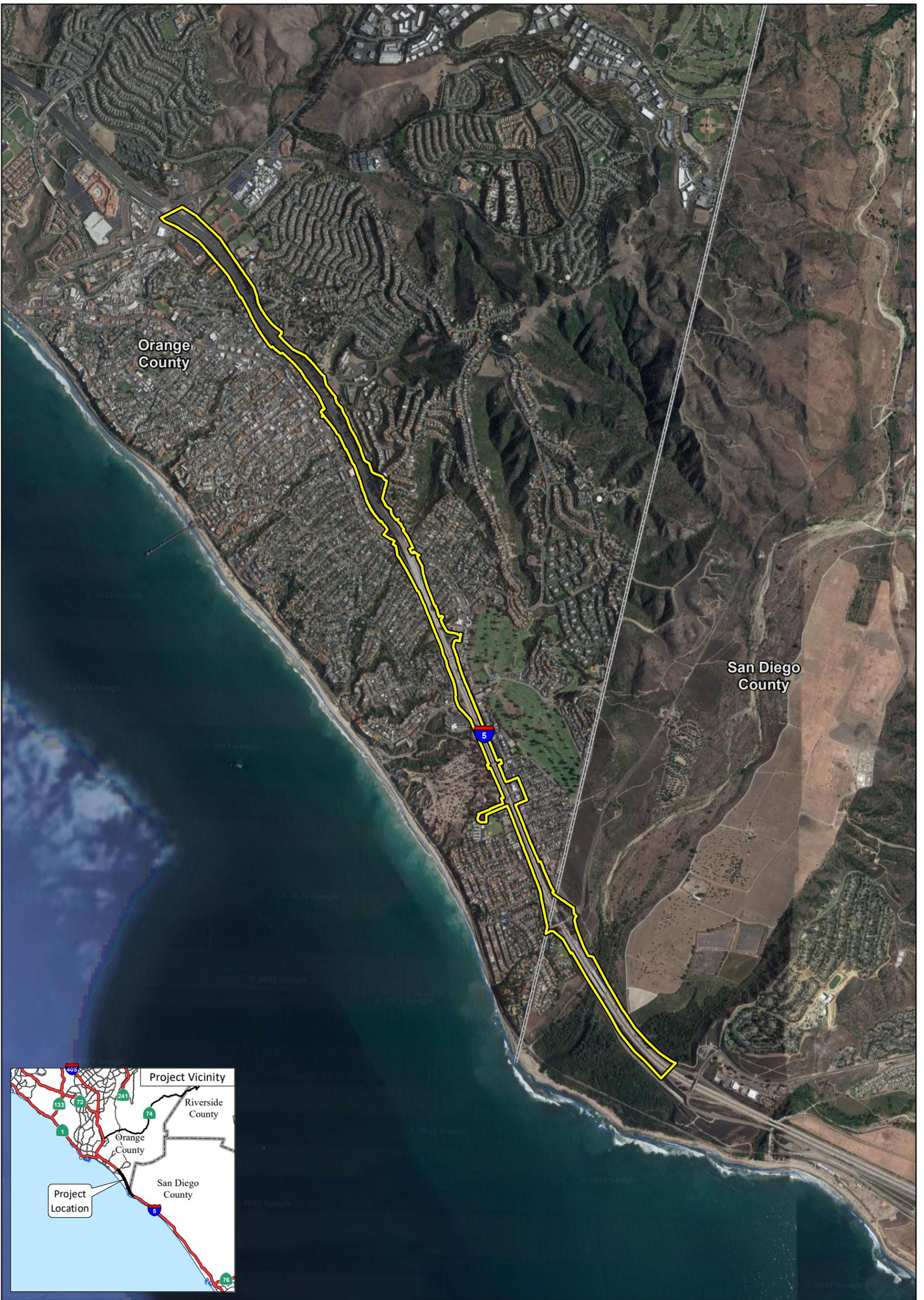


FIGURE 1

*I-5 Improvement Project
from San Diego County Line to Avenida Pico*

Project Location and Vicinity

11-SD-5-PM R71.0/R72.4, 12-ORA-5-PM 0.0/3.4

EA OP5500

Project History

I-5 is the main Interstate highway on the west coast of the United States (US), running south to north from the U.S./Mexico border to the US/Canada border.

The southern project limit is 1.4 miles south of the San Diego County line in unincorporated San Diego County. The proposed project includes the portion of I-5 that continues north through the City of San Clemente to the Avenida Pico interchange. The existing I-5 corridor in this area consists of only general-purpose lanes. High-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lane and operational improvements have been made on I-5 throughout Orange County north of the project limits. This Project is vital to enable the completion of the highway network (which is an HOV system throughout the Project limits) along the I-5 corridor in Orange County.

Description of the Project

The Proposed Project would increase person and vehicle throughput along I-5 between the San Diego County Line and the I-5/Avenida Pico interchange through the addition of an HOV lane in each direction. This Project would extend the existing HOV lane project that was recently completed on I-5 between San Juan Creek Bridge and Avenida Pico and effectively continue the HOV lane to the Orange County/San Diego County Line. The Proposed Project would also reestablish existing auxiliary lanes, widen existing undercrossings, and replace two existing overcrossings to accommodate the proposed HOV lanes.

The primary purpose of this project is to maximize efficiency of the freeway mainline by increasing person and vehicle throughput on the I-5 corridor from the San Diego County Line to Avenida Pico.

This project is intended to achieve the following purposes:

- Increase vehicle occupancy and vehicle throughput
- Improve mobility and trip reliability
- Provide inter- and intra-county connectivity
- Provide improvements to accommodate projected regional growth
- Incorporate environmentally sustainable design elements by developing efficient transportation improvements

- Improve multimodal efficiency and provide advanced technology to meet the current and future transportation demands

The need, or current deficiencies of I-5 within the project limits are summarized below:

- There is a lack of HOV lane connectivity from Avenida Pico to San Diego County Line; and
- Existing aging facility lacks advanced technology to meet current and future transportation demands.

Project Alternatives

Based on conceptual analysis, two alternatives are proposed for consideration. The preliminary alternatives under consideration include one No Build and one Build Alternative.

Alternative No. 1 (No Build):

The No Build Alternative proposes no improvements to I-5, maintaining the existing four general-purpose lanes throughout the Project limits in the northbound and southbound directions. The freeway facility would remain as is, with the exception of other proposed projects that are either under development or currently under construction.

Alternative No. 2 (Build Alternative):

Alternative 2 proposes to add an HOV lane on I-5 in the northbound and southbound directions within the project limits. The new HOV lane would connect to the existing HOV facility to the north of the project study area and extend south to the San Diego County/Orange County Line. The existing southbound inside general-purpose lane would be converted to an HOV lane between Avenida Pico and Avenida Presidio, the proposed southbound HOV lane would require outside widening to reestablish the fourth general purpose lane between Avenida Presidio and the San Diego County/Orange County Line, where the southbound HOV lane would become the inside general-purpose lane, and the outside general-purpose lane would transition to an auxiliary lane and ending south of the southbound Cristianitos Road exit ramp at the County Line. In the northbound direction, I-5 is proposed to be widened to the outside to accommodate the additional HOV lane. The additional HOV lane will tie into the existing HOV lane at Avenida Pico. To accommodate the freeway widening, the widening or replacement of several bridges would be required.

The Build Alternative would implement ramp improvements where feasible and auxiliary lanes throughout the corridor and would include Transportation Systems Management/Transportation Demand Management (TSM/TDM) features.

Environmental Factors

The purpose of the PA&ED phase is to explore the effects of the Proposed Project on the physical, human, and natural environment. Caltrans will evaluate all environmental, social, and economic impacts of the construction and operation of the Proposed Project. Impact areas to be addressed in the EIR/EA include, but may not be limited to traffic, land use, regional growth, land acquisition, displacements and relocations, cultural resources, recreational resources, air quality, biological resources, noise and vibration, and environmental justice. Measures to avoid, minimize, and mitigate all adverse impacts will be identified and evaluated.

Public Scoping Meeting

In addition to ongoing public engagement and outreach that will take place during the PA&ED phase, Caltrans will hold one in-person scoping meeting and one virtual scoping meeting. The purpose of the scoping meetings are to provide information to agencies and the public regarding the Proposed Project and to obtain feedback on the scope and content that should be addressed in the EIR/EA. Comments and suggestions on additional EIR/EA scope elements described in this NOP are invited from all interested agencies and the public to ensure that the full range of issues related to the Proposed Project and that all reasonable alternatives are addressed and all issues are identified.

Caltrans is interested in whether there are areas of environmental concern that should be identified as having the potential for impacts. In response to this NOP, public agencies with jurisdiction are requested to advise Caltrans of the applicable permit and environmental review requirements of each agency, and the scope and content of the environmental information that is germane to the agency's statutory responsibilities in connection with the Proposed Project.

The in-person scoping meeting will be held at the following location, date, and time:

Location: Triton Center, San Clemente High School

Date: July 28, 2022

Time: 5:30 pm – 7:30 pm

The virtual scoping meeting will be held via Zoom at the following web-link, date, and time:

Location: https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_-ljZdO2zSzy6mvYdDoPgnA

Date: August 2, 2022

Time: 5:30 pm – 7:30 pm

Information regarding the project scope, alternatives under consideration, and technical analysis that will be conducted for the EIR/EA will be available at the scoping meeting.

Comments

Scoping comments can be submitted via regular mail, project email, and through the court reporter during our scoping meeting.

Submit via mail to Jayna Harris, Associate/Senior Environmental Planner, 20 Executive Park, Suite 200, Irvine, CA 92614.

Email comments to I-5HOVSouthCounty@dot.ca.gov with the subject line **“I-5 Improvement Project from the County Line to Avenida Pico”**.

Comments may also be provided in writing during the in-person scoping meeting.

Please submit your comments no later than August 15, 2022, by 5 pm.

Additional Information

To obtain more information on the Proposed Project, scoping process, and scoping meetings, please visit the Caltrans website at <https://dot.ca.gov/caltrans-near-me/district-12/district-12-programs/district-12-environmental/i-5-hov-south-county-project>. To request alternative accommodations for accessing project information or for attending public scoping meetings, please contact the District 12 Public Information Office at (657) 328-6000. TDD users may contact the California Relay Service line at 1 (800) 735-2929 or Voice Line at 1 (800) 735-2922. Requests for alternative accommodations to attend scoping meetings must be made 15 days prior to the scoping meeting.

Reference: California Code of Regulations, Title 14, (CEQA Guidelines) Sections 15082(a), 15103, and 15375