Willits Economic LocaLization

November 20, 2006

Willits City Council
111 E. Commercial Street
Willits, Ca. 95490

Re: Willits Highway 101 Bypass

Dear City Council Members;

The Willits Economic LocaLization (WELL) Coordinating Committee asks you to reconsider your support for a 4-lane freeway bypass around Willits. Instead, we support a more appropriately scaled 2-lane bypass, such as the 2-lane "Alternative D" option in the FSEA report, presented by Caltrans to MCOG on Oct. 2nd, 2006. Additionally, we believe in exploring non-bypass options given the fiscal and environmental ramifications of the project.

Caltrans recently engaged in a re-review of less costly design options for the Willits bypass. In spring of 2005, the Willits bypass cost was estimated at $115 million. Today, the cost estimate is about $260 million. If the same rate of increase continues, a 4-lane bypass would cost about half a billion dollars by the time construction is scheduled to begin, and even more by the time it is complete. We wonder if this project is even possible now, even with passage of a highway bond.

We acknowledge that a bypass will provide some traffic congestion relief on Main Street. We also understand that a bypass will remove from Main Street regional truck traffic that is unrelated to local business, making Main Street somewhat more pedestrian friendly.

However, Caltrans' own traffic studies demonstrate that these benefits will accrue equally with a 2-lane bypass as with a bypass twice the size. As summarized on page 1 of the "Value Analysis Alternative" published Jan. 1999[1]:

> Traffic projections do not justify a 4-lane freeway facility for the design life of the project. Building two lanes now would reduce the initial capital cost…Passing lanes would also be provided to clear traffic queues, reduce congestion, and reduce driver frustration.

[1] See copy of document attached

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In addition, we propose consideration of improvements to traffic circulation in Willits such as the Baechtel Road/Railroad Ave. connection and the opening up of certain strategic street connections within Willits west of Hwy. 101. Much less costly than a 2-lane bypass would be a small designated truck route using primarily existing streets with the possible addition of logically placed new roads.

There are significant non-monetary costs associated with building a bypass. WELL has devoted a great deal of time studying the loss of farmland in our area and the demise of a diverse local food supply. As described in WELL's Food Security Report[2] and discussed at WELL's Elder Talk series at the Little Lake Grange, Little Lake Valley was once an agricultural "bread basket." Staples such as grains and potatoes, local dairies, and a diversity of fruits and vegetables were all raised here—a truly local economy.

One primary mission of WELL is to localize community necessities. Local food production is a major goal. Rebuilding a local food system is perhaps the most positive response to the challenges of peak oil and climate change as it dramatically cuts down on the fossil fuel inputs needed to get food to plates. Experience elsewhere in the U.S. also shows how a revived local food economy creates abundant and diverse job opportunities, enhancing the local tax base and retaining local youth. This would also make Willits more interesting, healthy, and secure. Currently, we have almost no food storage capacity in case of emergency, and an economy that imports nearly all essential goods.

Because of the seasonal flooding in the north, the best cropland in Little Lake Valley is in the southern third of the valley. The proposed 4-lane Modified Alternative J1T freeway, built on 5ft. to 25ft. of fill, will forever remove from agricultural production a corridor approximately 300ft. wide and two miles long through the southern part of the valley, and 5.6 miles long in total. In tables and maps, the final FEIS/EIR for the project documents that 104 acres of prime agricultural land, and a total of 140 acres of agricultural land, will be covered by the bypass using 1.3 million cubic yards of fill.[3] [4]

This is enough land to feed over 300 people per year. The population of the Willits area (about 14,000 people) requires about 4000 acres of high quality agricultural land to be fed, and this just so happens to be what remains in Little Lake Valley. If we are serious about growing significant quantities of food here, both crops and livestock, we cannot afford to lose another acre of this land base.

The Willits bypass EIR of 2002 acknowledges the tremendous incremental loss of farmland in Mendocino County. Section 6.2.5 states[5]:

[2] http://www.willitseconomiclocalization.org/Papers/FoodSecurityReport.pdf
[3] http://www.dot.ca.gov/dist1/d1projects/willits/08_feis_appendix_e_farmland.pdf
[4] http://www.dot.ca.gov/dist1/d1projects/willits/03_feis_chapters_1-7.pdf (See Chapter 3, Table 3.1 and Chapter 2.4.2)
[5] http://www.dot.ca.gov/dist1/d1projects/willits/chapter6_10.pdf

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> Out of 2,246,400 acres of land in Mendocino County, 94,039 acres or 4.19 percent is considered prime agricultural soils (NRCS-USDA figures). Of that amount, much is unavailable and covered by roads, highways, cities, parks, and other land uses. While growth is very slow in Mendocino County, settlement patterns have tended to occur in areas dominated by prime soils. Only one-third, or approximately 35,000 acres, of prime farmland remain available for agricultural use.

WELL and the City of Willits are both committed to reducing our community's production of greenhouse gases as part of a nationwide and worldwide effort to stem the tide of global warming. To achieve these reductions, we must reduce the number of miles we drive, both within Willits and regionally. Instead of putting nearly all MCOG regional transportation funds towards bypass projects, we support the use of MCOG funds to build a transportation infrastructure that contributes to a reduction in greenhouse gases, and is useful in a post peak-oil world.

With respect to peak oil, please consider the following math behind depletion rates and what these mean for the rationale of large freeway projects. Many scientists believe the world peaked in oil production during 2005, is currently on a plateau, and that a very noticeable decline will begin by about 2010.[6] It is possible that decline will not begin until 2015 or so, but the exact dates are not critical. The rate of decline is estimated as a range between 2% and 8%, and is likely to be slow initially before accelerating. In a production decline environment, the amount of oil available for export to the U.S., which imports nearly 2/3 of its current consumption, would likely be less than the overall decline rate since countries exporting to the U.S. would allocate internally before exporting.[7] Planning for a 5% decline in available transportation fuels from 2010 onwards would therefore be sound policy. The implications of this are stunning. By 2024 we would expect to have only half the gasoline and diesel we currently use, and by 2038 only one quarter. The executive summary of the “Hirsch Report” commissioned by the U.S. Department of Energy places the implications of this information into context[8]:

> The peaking of world oil production presents the U.S. and the world with an unprecedented risk management problem. As peaking is approached, liquid fuel prices and price volatility will increase dramatically, and, without timely mitigation, the economic, social, and political costs will be unprecedented. Viable mitigation options exist on both the supply and demand sides, but to have substantial impact, they must be initiated more than a decade in advance of peaking.

[6] http://www.theoildrum.com/story/2006/10/25/13020/044
[7] http://www.energybulletin.net/22213.html
[8] http://www.netl.doe.gov/publications/others/pdf/Oil_Peaking_NETL.pdf

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Dealing responsibly with climate change also means we need to transition away from fossil fuel use as quickly as possible. We can have a relatively stable climate and continue to enjoy premium wine grapes and healthy forests in our region, or we can push for more trucks and automobiles. To call for both is illogical and irresponsible. To build a bypass to accommodate ever more vehicles will only signal our failed commitment to slow global warming.

We understand that plans for the 4-lane bypass were made several years ago without consideration of the many issues brought up in this letter. WELL asks that the project be re-evaluated in light of contemporary understanding. Caltrans needs to hear the message that we are committed to using *our* own transportation funds to build a transportation system that allows us to begin to replace our daily need for personal fossil fuel dependent vehicles. Furthermore, as policies related to AB32[9] are enacted, Caltrans and the California Transportation Commission will undoubtedly be forced to think along these same lines.

WELL is working to help the City of Willits become a beacon of sustainable living. "Sustainable" means able to persist indefinitely. What this means for Willits is an appropriately sized bypass, if one is necessary at all, a vigorous internal and regional transit system of buses, jitneys and rail, and local streets that safely and conveniently accommodate pedestrians and bicyclists of all ages. The WELL Energy Report documents the current energy use of the Willits area and outlines a plan for reducing this consumption and developing local energy systems.[10]

Please take this opportunity to reconsider the appropriateness of supporting a 4-lane freeway bypass. As fossil fuel becomes increasingly scarce, this moment in history may be our last chance to build a transportation infrastructure for the future. The loss of cheap transportation fuel will make it difficult to engage in major infrastructure projects. Most of the raw and finished materials that go into roads, bridges and buildings, for example, are mined, processed and transported using fossil fuels. Therefore, if we want a relatively smooth transition to a non-fossil fuel based transportation system, we need to invest in that before the energy crunch becomes acute. The importance of planning well ahead of time for this transition is made clear by the previously mentioned Hirsch Report. We advocate quiet, clean, efficient, and human-scaled transport options, and request that public funds be allocated towards these goals. There is urgency in this matter.

[9] http://www.arb.ca.gov/cc/cc.htm
[10] http://www.willitseconomiclocalization.org/Papers/EnergyIndependencePlan.pdf

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Thank you for your thoughtful consideration.

Sincerely,

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