

## OCTax News and Opinion for Taxpayers

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### **Opposition to the 241 extension deepens**

**The 241 toll road hearing is postponed, but opposition to a sensible plan seems hard to overcome.**

Although the California Coastal Commission postponed its public hearing on Thursday to consider the Transportation Corridor Agencies' plan to extend the 241 Toll Road from Oso Parkway to I-5 south of San Clemente, there's no question that the toll-road project is in deep trouble. Last month, the commission staff released a report saying, "It would be difficult to imagine a more environmentally damaging alternative location for the proposed toll road." And it concluded that "[n]o measures exist that would enable the proposed alignment to be found consistent with the Coastal Act."

The commission, a bastion of no-growth sentiment backed by immense regulatory authority, is clear that there's nothing the Transportation Corridor Agencies' could do to satisfy the staff. In 2005, when the commission began examining the TCA proposal, a commission analyst told the Register, "We think alternatives that are less damaging ought to be implemented – if you need a toll road at all, which is questionable." So much for keeping an open mind.

But the commission isn't the only source of opposition. Given the ongoing fiscal problems in San Diego, one would think city officials there would have more things to worry about than a toll road expansion in Orange County that only touches a sliver of north San Diego County, yet the San Diego City Council has voted to oppose the project. Environmental groups from throughout the region were planning to show up at the coastal commission hearing Thursday to vent their opposition to something that supposedly will harm habitats, threaten an endangered mouse and even worsen global warming, if the commission staff report is to be believed.

Global warming apparently is the trump card these days, although one could argue that a free flow of traffic – instead of bumper-to-bumper congestion caused by a lack of road capacity – would cause fewer emissions. Nevertheless, the construction of a new road should not hinge on abstract ideas such as global warming, or on preposterous allegations that extending a road a few miles would have any impact on climate change. It's troubling, also, that a state agency could have such sway over local decision-making.

More germane, many opponents claim the route will damage San Onofre State Park, even though it won't have any direct impact on the most widely used areas of the park, namely the beach. In

response to that reality, road opponents note that the elevated freeway would harm views and intrude on the "ambience" of the park's campground. No doubt, roads are not the most beautiful structures, and cars make noise. That's life. But traffic congestion is an enormous problem that intrudes on the ambience of most of our everyday lives.

Opponents of the toll road extension say that other alternatives need to be found, yet they don't offer any realistic alternatives. The Transportation Corridor Agencies have gone to great lengths to minimize the ill effects of the road extension. But no minimization will ever be enough because many if not most opponents of this plan simply are opposed to growth. They believe that new roads will lead to new development. They believe that if agencies stop building roads, people will stop coming to the region. This is the recipe for worsening gridlock.

As the Orange County Taxpayers Association has argued, the 241 toll road extension helps the economy, which provides the dollars needed to maintain the local environment. It is funded largely through tolls (and private investment through revenue bonds) rather than taxes. It will reduce pollution by reducing stop-and-go traffic. It's a sensible solution, but it's hard to fight against no-growth sentiment, angry environmentalists and a government agency with vast powers. The debate will continue, probably in February, when the commission is likely to reschedule its hearing.