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Current Status: Agenda Ready
Matter Type: Zoning Administrator

PLN240238 - CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION (Coastlands II Retaining Wall)

Consider demolition of a failed retaining wall, construction of a replacement retaining wall and new guard rail barrier system, restoration of the roadway, development within the Critical Viewshed, and development on slopes in excess of 30%.

Project Location: State Route Highway 1, Post Mile Marker (PM) 44.34, Big Sur

Proposed CEQA action: Consider a previously adopted Mitigated Negative Declaration pursuant to CEQA Guidelines section 15162 and find that no additional environmental review is required.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Zoning Administrator adopt a resolution to:

a. Consider a previously adopted Mitigated Negative Declaration (SCH No. 2023040738) pursuant to CEQA Guidelines section 15162 and find that no additional environmental review is required; and
b. Approve a Combined Development Permit consisting of:
    1. Coastal Development Permit for the demolition of a failed retaining wall, construction of a 185 linear foot retaining wall and a 360 linear foot guardrail, restoration of the roadway, and associated site improvements;
    2. Coastal Development Permit to allow development within the Critical Viewshed; and
    3. Coastal Development Permit for development on slopes in excess of 30%.

The attached draft resolution includes findings and evidence for consideration (**Exhibit A**). Staff recommends approval subject to 6 conditions of approval.

PROJECT INFORMATION

Agent: Adam Digiovine, Caltrans
Property Owner: California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), District 5
APN: 000-000-000-000 (within Caltrans right-of-way)
Parcel Size: Approximately 0.2 miles
Zoning: Unclassified
Plan Area: Big Sur Coast Land Use Plan
Flagged and Staked: N/A

SUMMARY/DISCUSSION

Caltrans proposes to construct a soldier pile retaining wall along the southbound lane to restore and protect Highway 1 from a failed retaining wall and slide activity at this location. The project would

also increase the shoulder width to 4 feet, replace an existing culvert to improve drainage, and include installation of a bridge rail with guardrail approaches along the length of the project. As proposed, the development would be consistent with other retaining walls constructed along the highway and within the vicinity. The project also involves approximately 1,200 square feet of development on slopes exceeding 30 percent, and development within the Big Sur Critical Viewshed. The proposed retaining wall would be constructed with 12 steel piles, timber lagging inserted between the piles, and ground or soil anchors drilled into the slope.

Land Use
Big Sur Coast Land Use Plan (LUP) Policies in Chapter 4 are directed at maintaining and enhancing the aesthetic beauty of Highway 1, and to protect its primary function as a recreational route. The LUP also promotes improvements for safety and traffic capacity (Policies 4.1.2.1 and 4.1.3.A.1). The project, as proposed, is an improvement required to assure the continued use of the highway for recreational and emergency access; therefore, it is consistent with applicable policies.

Big Sur Critical Viewshed & Design
The project includes a Coastal Development Permit to allow development within the Big Sur Critical Viewshed, which is defined as everything visible from Highway 1. The Critical Viewshed Key Policy 3.2.1 prohibits all future public and private development visible from Highway 1 and major public viewing areas (the critical viewshed), and to condition all new development in areas not visible from Highway 1 or major public viewing areas on the siting and design criteria set forth in Sections 3.2.3, 3.2.4, and 3.2.5 of the LUP. As proposed, the project would stabilize the highway from continued slide activity and erosion at this location. County staff reviewed plans of the proposed development, as well as aerial imagery of the site and surrounding area, to assess the potential viewshed impacts of the project and ensure consistency with applicable LUP policies. LUP Policy 3.2.5.C.1 allows exceptions to the Scenic Resources Key Policy involving safety improvements to Highway 1, provided such improvements are consistent with LUP Sections 4.1.1, 4.1.2, and 4.1.3. LUP Key Policy 4.1.1 states that the County's objective is to maintain and enhance the highway's aesthetic beauty and to protect its primary function as a recreational route. Policy 4.1.2.1 states that improvements to Highway 1 shall be undertaken in order to increase its service capacity and safety, consistent with its retention as a scenic two-lane road. Policy 4.1.3 states that in order to maximize vehicular access to the Big Sur coast, the width of Highway 1 should be upgraded to a standard of 12-foot lanes and 2-4 foot shoulders where physically practical and consistent with the preservation of other coastal resources values.

County staff has reviewed the required sections, and the project is consistent with the subject policies. The project is a safety improvement that, as proposed, will maintain the roadway and its continued use as a two-lane highway for access to the Big Sur community, as well as maximizing vehicular access by widening the lanes to 12 feet and providing a 4-foot shoulder. The ST-75 guardrail allows for continuous visual passthrough and will not significantly impede on existing ocean and Big Sur coastline views pursuant to LUP Policy 3.2.3.A.4. In addition to the BSC LUP, the project is also consistent with the primary goals of the Big Sur Coast Highway Management Plan (BSCHMP), which are as follows: maintaining the road in a safe operating condition, supporting the traveler experience, protecting corridor resources, and providing for a balanced, coordinated, action-oriented approach to achieving the corridor vision. The project, as proposed, is consistent as the repair of the failed retaining wall at this location and installation of a needed barrier system to preserve utility and public access to

the Big Sur area while also protecting resources and providing a balanced, coordinated approach to the corridor's vision. The proposed retaining wall and guardrail are consistent with other retaining walls found along this corridor (ST-75 guardrail) and the guardrail's steel horizontal rails will be darkened or stained to maintain the rustic look of the Big Sur Highway identified in the BSCHMP. Therefore, the County finds that the proposed project minimizes development within the Big Sur Critical Viewshed, and meets the intent of the applicable policies regarding visual resources.

Development on Slopes Exceeding 30 Percent

The proposed development is necessary to protect Highway 1 from additional slides and scour activity at this location. Additionally, there are no feasible alternative building sites or project designs that would avoid development on slopes that exceed 30% while continuing to meet the project's goal: improve Highway 1 safety. The project site slopes steeply down from Highway 1, and based on site topography, construction of the retaining wall is not feasible without encroaching into slopes exceeding 30%. Winter storms in 2016 and 2017 caused erosion and failure of the southbound roadway embankment slope and shoulder. Subsequent temporary stabilizing measures have also failed. Without the proposed retaining wall, the area below the highway would continue to be vulnerable to further sloughing, which could undermine and potentially close the highway. Additionally, per the project applicant, the proposed length and height of the retaining wall are the minimum necessary to prevent further slide activity at this location. Thus, as proposed, the subject project is necessary to address a potential public safety concern and minimize development on slopes exceeding 30%, in accordance with the applicable goals and policies of the LUP.

Tree Removal

The project involves the removal of five Monterey cypress, two Coast live oak, and one Buckeye tree. Pursuant to LUP Policy 5.4.2.13, CIP sectopm 20.145.060.A.1, amd Title 20 section 20.70.025, a Coastal development permit is required for the removal of trees with the following exceptions: removal of planted trees, and removal of trees with a diameter of 12" or less at breast height. An arborist report (Monterey County Document No. LIB250024) identified that three of the Monterey cypress trees were planted and the remaining five trees are below the 12" diameter threshold, and are therefore exempt from needing a Coastal Development Permit There are no landmark native trees proposed for removal in accordance with CIP section 20.145.060.D. The Mitigated Negative Declaration requires revegetation for aesthetic and slope stabilization purposes, as well as to provide screening from the retaining wall for nearby residences. The arborist report noted that while Monterey cypress are native to California and to parts of Monterey County, they are not native to this specific area of Big Sur and it is recommended to replant Coast live oak trees in lieu of cypress trees, which is appropriate for this area of Big Sur, and a total of five trees are proposed to be replanted (four Coast live oak and one Buckeye).

OTHER AGENCY INVOLVEMENT

The following agencies have reviewed the project, have comments, and/or have recommended conditions:

HCD-Engineering Services
Environmental Health Bureau
HCD-Environmental Services
Carmel Fire Protection Associates

LAND USE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

County staff referred the project to the Big Sur Land Use Advisory Committee (LUAC) for review. The LUAC, at a duly-noticed public meeting on December 10, 2024, voted unanimously (5-0) to support the project with the recommendation for a five year landscape monitoring plan to include the removal of invasive species such as jubata grass. Caltrans responded that they include a standard one-year monitoring plan requirement with their contracts; however, the responsibility of maintentenance falls under Caltran's responsibility after the contract has ended and they do not have a maintenance program that would allow the ability to monitor and remove invasive species.

CEQA

On October 10, 2023, California Department of Transportation (CalTrans), as Lead Agency, adopted an Initial Study/Mitigated Negative Declaration (State Clearning Housing No. 2023040738) for the demolition of a failed retaining wall and the construction of a replacement retaining wall and new guardrail system, restoration of the roadway, widening the shoulder to 4 feet, reconstruction of the drainage inlet and culvert, development within the Critical Viewshed, and development on slopes in excess of 30%. The Mitigated Negative Declaration identified potentially significant impacts to biological resources, cultural resources, geology and soils, land use and planning, and tribal cultural resources. Mitigation measures were adopted to reduce the identified impacts to a level of less than significant. The proposed project involves the demolition of a failed retaining wall and the construction of a replacement retaining wall and new guardrail system, restoration of the roadway, widening the shoulder to 4 feet, development within the Critical Viewshed, and development on slopes in excess of 30%. The proposed project description is consistent with the scope analyzed in the adopted Mitigated Negative Declaration - the construction of a new retaining wall and guardrail system.

Pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines Section 15162, when an EIR has been certified or a negative declaration has been adopted, no subsequent EIR or negative declaration shall be prepared for the project unless the agency determines that substantial changes are proposed, or substantial changes occur with respect to the circumstances under which the project is undertaken. As amended, the proposed project has eliminated the reconstruction of the drainage inlet and culvert from the scope of work. The project also involves development within the Critical Viewshed and development on slopes in excess of 30%. The proposed project description is consistent with the scope analyzed in the adopted Mitigated Negative Declaration - the construction of a new retaining wall and guardrail system. In this case, no new information has been presented to warrant further environmental review. No new information of substantial importance has been identified that was not known at the time the Mitigated Negative Declaration was adopted, which would indicate that the project would have significant effects which have not been evaluated, an increase in severity for any potential environmental effects, or the modification of any of the adopted mitigation measures.

Prepared by: Hya Honorato, Assistant Planner, x5173
Reviewed and Approved by: Fionna Jensen, Principal Planner

The following attachments are on file with HCD:
Exhibit A - Draft Resolution including:

- Recommended Conditions of Approval
- Site Plans

Exhibit B - Adopted Mitigated Negative Declaration (SCH No. 2023040738)
Exhibit C - Big Sur LUAC Minutes for December 10, 2024
Exhibit D - Vicinity Map
Exhibit E - Arborist Report

cc: Front Counter Copy; Calfire Big Sur Fire Protection District; HCD-Environmental Services; HCD-Engineering Services; Environmental Health Bureau; Hya Honorato, Project Planner; Fionna Jensen, Principal Planner; Caltrans, Property Owners; The Open Monterey Project; LandWatch (Executive Director); Lozeau Drury LLP; Christina McGinnis, Keep Big Sur Wild; Planning File PLN240238.