PASSED BY
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AUG 2 4 2000
CALIFORNIA
TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION

CALIFORNIA TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION

Resolution for Adoption of Findings
11-Imp-7 1.2/6.7

Resolution E-01-6

1.1 **WHEREAS**, an Environmental Impact Report has been prepared for a project to construct a 4-lane expressway between Route 98 and Interstate 8 near the City of Calexico, Imperial County, and

1.2 **WHEREAS,** the Department has certified that the Environmental Impact Report has been completed in compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and the State CEQA Guidelines for its implementation; and

1.3 **WHEREAS,** the California Transportation Commission has reviewed and considered the information contained in the Environmental Impact Report; and

1.4 **WHEREAS,** written proposed Findings indicate that changes or alterations have been required in, or incorporated into the project which mitigate or avoid the significant effects identified in the Environmental Impact Report and associated noise, air quality, biological resources, visual resources; and

1.5 **WHEREAS,** such findings also indicate that specific economic, legal, social, technological, or other considerations make it infeasible to avoid or fully mitigate to a level less than significant the effects associated with agricultural land; and

1.6 **WHEREAS,** the above significant effects are acceptable when balanced against the facts as set forth in the Statement of Overriding Considerations.

2.1 **NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** that the California Transportation Commission does hereby adopt those Findings and Statement Overriding Considerations, and the Mitigation Monitoring Program contained in the Environmental Impact Report and approve the project for future consideration of funding.

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION FINDINGS

FOR STATE ROUTE 7 FOUR-LANE EXPRESSWAY CONSTRUCTION

FROM STATE ROUTE 98 TO INTERSTATE 8

IN IMPERIAL COUNTY, CALIFORNIA.

The following information is presented to comply with Section 15091 of the State CEQA Guidelines. Reference is made to the Final Environmental Impact Report (FEIR) for the project, which is the basic source for the information. The FEIR with its supporting technical reports and information is kept on file at CALTRANS - DISTRICT 11, 2829 Juan Street, San Diego, CA 92110. Included in the FEIR is a Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Record, which is used as a tool to ensure compliance with all mitigation measures, including measures to lessen significant environmental effects.

The following effects have been identified in the FEIR as resulting from the project. Effects found not to be significant have not been included.

NOISE

Adverse Environmental Effect:

At two residences that will remain adjacent to the expressway project future noise levels would increase substantially. Existing noise levels for both residences are 52 dBA and would increase to 68 dBA or 65 dBA.

Findings:

Changes or alterations have been required in, or incorporated into, the project that mitigate or avoid the significant environmental effect thereof as identified in the FEIR.

Statement of Facts:

On-site or off-site noise attenuation measures could provide a substantial reduction in noise levels but were found to be either not reasonable or not feasible according to the Caltrans Traffic Noise Analysis Protocol guidelines (approved October 28, 1998). Landscaped berms that are being provided as visual mitigation to screen intrusive expressway views will provide a substantial reduction of noise at affected residential receptor sites.

AIR QUALITY

Adverse Environmental Effect:

The Imperial County area is currently designated as "non-attainment" for the state and federal standards for PM-10 (particulate matter or dust). During the 12 to 18 month construction period,

there would be a substantial, though temporary, increase in emissions of PM-10 from grading and other construction activities. PM-10 emissions during the long term operation of the project would be minor.

Construction-phase emissions of PM-10 would exceed the 250-pound per day criterion used in the air quality analysis to indicate a substantial increase in emissions using CEQA procedures. Therefore, under CEQA, PM-10 would be a substantial, though temporary, impact of project construction.

Findings:

Changes or alterations have been required in, or incorporated into, the project that mitigate or avoid the significant environmental effect thereof as identified in the FEIR.

Statement of Facts:

Caltrans standard construction specifications will be implemented to reduce fugitive dust emissions during construction. Caltrans will require the construction contractor to prepare a construction dust abatement and management plan for review and approval by Caltrans resident engineer prior to any construction grading. This plan shall include all mandatory and applicable dust control programs contained in Regulation VIII of the Imperial County Air Pollution Control District (APCD). Regulation VIII requires the use of one or more reasonably available dust control measures (RACM). In order to establish an enhanced control program, adequate water shall be used in all grading operations, and at least two RACM from the PM-10 control options in Regulation VIII shall be utilized for the program to be adequately effective to qualify as a markedly enhanced effort. Representatives from Caltrans shall periodically monitor grading and construction activities to ensure compliance with the county APCD Regulation VIII RACM.

Construction practices will observe the following specific measures:

- Water all active construction areas at least twice daily (using non-potable water where feasible).
- Cover all trucks hauling soil, sand, and other loose materials or require all trucks to maintain at least 2 feet of freeboard (i.e., the minimum required space between the top of the load and the top of the trailer).
- Pave, or apply water three times daily, or apply (non-toxic) soil stabilizers on all unpaved access roads, parking areas, and staging areas at construction sites.
- Sweep daily (preferably with water sweepers) all paved access roads, parking areas, and staging areas at construction sites.
- Sweep street daily (preferably with water sweepers) if visible soil material is carried onto adjacent public streets.
- Hydroseed or apply (non-toxic) soil stabilizers to inactive construction areas (previously graded areas inactive for ten days or more).
- Enclose, cover, water twice daily, or apply (non-toxic) soil binders to exposed stockpiles (dirt, sand, etc.).

- Limit traffic speeds on unpaved roads to 15 mph.
- Install sandbags or other erosion control measures to prevent silt runoff to public roads.
- Replant vegetation in disturbed areas as quickly as possible.

The above measures would be expected to reduce uncontrolled fugitive dust and associated PM-10 emissions by up to 75%, and as such, would reduce the impact to less-than-significant.

AGRICULTURAL LAND

Adverse Environmental Effect:

The preferred alternative (Alternative 1) will convert approximately 120 hectares (295 acres) of prime and statewide significant farmland to non-farm uses. Under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), a project's conversion of prime agricultural land to non-agricultural use is normally considered a major impact.

Findings:

Specific economic, social, or other considerations make infeasible the mitigation measures or project alternatives identified in the Final EIR.

Statement of Facts:

Caltrans will coordinate with Imperial County and appropriate state and federal officials to investigate the feasibility of preserving farmland equal to the amount directly impacted by the project 120 ha (295 ac). This would be accomplished by purchasing a conservation easement on a willing seller's property or by providing funding to a farmland preservation program. The conservation easement(s) or funding could be dedicated to either the State of California Agricultural Land Stewardship Program or to an American Farmland Trust program for lands in Imperial Valley. The implementation of such a plan for agricultural land preservation in one of the nation's prime agricultural regions would reduce the farmland impact of the project though it would remain significant.

The Statement of Overriding Considerations, infra, includes further statements of specific economic, social, and other considerations which support adoption of the subject project instead of the identified alternatives to the project.

BIOLOGICAL RESOURCES

Adverse Environmental Effect:

Impacts would occur to the western burrowing owl and mountain plover regardless of the build alternative selected. The impacts to burrowing owl are considered major because of the sensitivity of the species, the size of the population impacted, and the regional significance of this population. Mountain plover is a federal proposed threatened species and California Department of Fish and Game Species of Concern. The plover winters in the Imperial Valley

between the months of September and March, foraging on irrigated farmlands. About 100 plovers were observed during biological surveys conducted during November 1999.

Findings:

Changes or alterations have been required in, or incorporated into, the project that mitigate or avoid the significant environmental effect thereof as identified in the FEIR.

Statement of Facts:

Owls will be flushed from their burrows under the supervision of a qualified biologist. Owl burrows will be excavated and covered outside the owl's breeding season. Artificial burrows will be designed and placed at specified locations within or adjacent to the project vicinity. The design, number and location of burrows will be coordinated with the US Fish and Wildlife Service and Imperial Irrigation District.

Specific mitigation for impacts to the mountain plover is currently being coordinated with the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

VISUAL RESOURCES

Adverse Environmental Effect:

According to the visual analysis, adverse visual impacts would result from the project features including views of the roadway from residences, views of highway appurtenances, removal or obstruction of existing vertical features in the landscape, and alteration of the existing north-south rectilinear landscape features.

Findings:

Changes or alterations have been required in, or incorporated into, the project that mitigate or avoid the significant environmental effect thereof as identified in the FEIR.

Statement of Facts:

Mitigation measures including graded, landscaped berms will be implemented to lessen the impacts of the project to acceptable levels for existing viewer groups including residents in the vicinity of King Road, agricultural workers, motorists and park users. Planting and facility design measures will address negative views of the roadway from residences, view blockage and loss of existing landscape features, and highway appurtenances such as traffic barriers, signage, and lighting.

CUMULATIVE IMPACTS

Adverse Environmental Effect:

Cumulative impacts that will occur to agricultural land, visual quality, biological resources, water quality and noise are significant when considered in combination with impacts of other highway projects in Imperial County.

Cumulative impacts to agricultural land involve conversion of important farmland in the prime and statewide significant farmland categories to non-farmland uses. The cumulative impacts of Caltrans highway projects in Imperial County amount to 1087 hectares (2686 acres) of important farmland.

Cumulative impacts to visual quality result from highway projects incrementally contributing to change in the visual character from rural to semi urban. Impacts include views of the roadway from residences, highway appurtenances, removal or obstruction of existing vertical features in the landscape, and alteration of rectilinear farmland landscape features.

Highway projects cumulatively impact biological resources through displacement of species from agricultural fields and drains, and reduction of the area used for foraging habitat and nesting. The 1087 ha (2686 ac) of cumulative farmland impacts would remove some fields that the Mountain plover uses as foraging areas. Burrowing owls would use areas at the perimeter of farm fields and along the banks of canals for burrow construction and nesting. Highway projects also may induce new urban growth in adjacent agricultural areas, further reducing habitat areas.

Cumulative impacts to water quality will result from the incremental increase in impervious surfaces that will impact surface drainage patterns, increase loads on existing drainage capacities and increase urban runoff volumes and flows to natural drainage.

Ambient noise levels would incrementally increase throughout the project area as highway and development projects are completed. The primary noise sources would be traffic on highway projects, and industrial noise associated with developments at the East Calexico Port of Entry, and the Gateway Specific Plan Area. Off-highway vehicle noise generated by recreation uses at the proposed Heber Dunes County Park Off-Highway Vehicle Recreation Area would also contribute to increased ambient noise.

Findings:

Changes or alterations have been required in, or incorporated into, the project that mitigate or avoid the significant environmental effect to visual quality, biological resources, water quality, and noise as identified in the FEIR.

Specific economic, social, or other considerations make infeasible the mitigation measures or project alternatives for cumulative agricultural land impacts identified in the Final EIR.

Statement of Facts:

Development of related projects would contribute to increased levels of ambient noise in the project area. Natural topography and distance of sensitive receptors from the source would attenuate noise to some degree. Caltrans considers noise abatement measures for highway projects where it is determined there is a noise impact, and noise abatement measures would be implemented where it is determined to be reasonable and feasible, in accordance with the Caltrans Traffic Noise Analysis Protocol of October, 1998. Sensitive receptors on the Route 7 project would have noise levels attenuated by landscaped berms proposed for visual mitigation. Mitigation measures would reduce cumulative visual, water quality and biological resource impacts to a level below significance. Project farmland impacts and cumulative farmland impacts would remain significant.

The Statement of Overriding Considerations, infra, includes further statements of specific economic, social, and other considerations which support adoption of the subject project instead of the identified alternatives to the project.

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION
STATEMENT OF OVERRIDING CONSIDERATIONS FOR
CONSTRUCTION OF STATE ROUTE 7 EXPRESSWAY
FROM STATE ROUTE 98 TO INTERSTATE 8
IN IMPERIAL COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

The following information is presented to comply with Section 15093 of the State CEQA Guidelines, and Section 1509.6 of the Department of Transportation and California Transportation Commission Environmental Regulations. Reference is made to the Final Environmental Impact Statement/Environmental Impact Report (EIS/EIR) for the project, which is the basic source for the information.

Overriding considerations that support approval of this recommended project are as follows:

Project Benefits

The project will:

- improve operating efficiency and safety on roads in the project area;
- enhance he movement of international goods and services through Imperial County;
- relieve congestion on the existing roads, particularly on Route 111;
- improve air quality in the region by decreasing congestion on Route 111;
- accommodate and support the growth in cross-border trade as well as increased developments around the Calexico East Port of Entry.

Alternatives Studied

Alternatives discussed in the Final EIS/EIR include:

Alternative 1 – Orchard Road Alignment (Preferred)
Alternative 1A – Mets Road Alignment
Alternative 1B – Anderholt/Mets Alignment
Alternative 4 – "West" Anderholt/Mets Alignent
Alternative 4A – Route 98 – "West" Anderholt/Mets Alignment

Alternative 1: Orchard Road Alignment (Preferred)

Alternative 1 proposes to construct the expressway from the terminus of the first segment of Route 7 north between the Heber Dunes Park and the Alamo River, across the IID South Alamo Canal and Heber Road, and alongside much of existing Orchard Road. It would cross McCabe Road and intersect and maintain the Orchard Road alignment into the modified interchange at I-8. This alternative would impact various Imperial Irrigation District (IID) facilities and would need to bridge the Alamo Canal at Heber Road. Roadway stormwater runoff would drain to retention and/or detention basins that would control the flow of water to the natural drainage at the Alamo River.

Alternative 1A: Mets Road Alignment

Alternative 1A was selected for study because it would avoid a localized area of prime farmland and groups of residences along Orchard Road just south of I-8. This alternative also proposed to construct the highway from the existing junction of Route 7 and Route 98 north between Heber Dunes County Park and the Alamo River. It would then curve west as it crosses the IID South Alamo Canal and Heber Road, and proceed northwesterly crossing the IID Ash Main Canal and Schenk Drains No. 11 and 7, until it nears existing Mets Road. It would then parallel much of Mets Road, cross McCabe Road, and intersect and maintain the Mets Road alignment into the existing overcrossing at I-8. Alternative 1A would require a new interchange and improvements to the existing overcrossing at I-8.This alternative was not selected because of its overall greater impacts to farmland in the area and cost. The larger magnitude of farmland impacts results from the relative length of this alternative and its diagonal traversing of large agricultural fields that produces parcel remnants that would require substantial irrigation and access changes to continue farming. In addition, this alternative would need to bridge two canals and a drain, which were of concern to IID. Also, construction of a new interchange at I-8 would have resulted in the removal of the existing Orchard Road interchange. Removal of the existing interchange was a primary concern to residents in the Holtville community as the interchange provides direct access to I-8. Furthermore, given the cost of additional structures coupled with reconstruction of a new interchange, this alternative would not have been cost effective. For these reasons this alternative was not selected.

Alternative 1B: Anderholt/Mets Alignment

This alternative proposed to construct the southern half of the highway as described in Alternative 1A above. North of the IID South Alamo Canal and Heber Road it would proceed northwesterly across the IID Ash Main Canal and Schenk Drains 7 and 11, Mets Road and McCabe Road, as it curves northerly midway between Anderholt and Mets roads. The alignment would then continue directly to I-8 and connect with a full new interchange. The new interchange connection at I-8 would consist of two separate overcrossings with standards consistent with the approaching expressway. Because there are no existing roadways north of the proposed interchange, the southbound to eastbound/westbound ramps would not be constructed as part of this project. This alternative, like Alternative 1A, was not identified as the preferred alternative because of its relatively greater impacts to the area and cost. The impacts include diagonally traversing large agricultural fields resulting in additional costs to reconfigure irrigation and access, construction of a new interchange at I-8, and greater disruption to IID water delivery/drain facilities. IID facility impacts would include the need to bridge the Ash Main Canal in addition to the Alamo Canal. Caltrans ability to drain stormwater runoff from the expressway would be more restricted because of the distance from the Alamo River. Given the cost of additional structures coupled with reconstruction of a new interchange, and the extended length of the expressway, this alternative would not have been cost effective. For these reasons this alternative was not selected.

Alternative 4: "West" Anderholt/Mets Alignment

Alternative 4 proposed to construct the new highway from the existing junction of Route 7 and Route 98 northwesterly across the IID South Alamo Canal and around the south-west edge of Heber Dunes County Park. The alignment would then proceed north, mid-way between Anderholt Road and Mets Road, crossing the IID Ash Main Canal, Heber and McCabe Roads, and continue directly to a full new interchange at I-8. This alternative was not identified as preferred because of farmland impacts south of Heber Dunes Park due to the diagonal

alignment, large reversing curves near the south end of the alignment that decrease operational efficiency, and the added cost of bridging both the Alamo Canal and the Ash Main Canal. In addition, the ability to drain stormwater runoff would be more restricted on the west side of Heber Dunes Park because of the distance to the Alamo River. With the additional cost of structures required to bridge the both the Alamo and Ash Main canals, coupled with a new interchange at I-8, and the extended length of the expressway, this alternative would be less cost effective than the Preferred Alternative.

Alternative 4A: Route 98 - "West" Anderholt/Mets Alignment

This alternative proposed to widen approximately 2.1 km (1.3 mi.) of existing Route 98 from a two lane to a four lane conventional highway west from the junction of existing Route 7 and Route 98, and then construct the new highway northerly. The proposed highway would curve west of the Heber Dunes County Park, and like Alternative 4, cross the IID Ash Main Canal, Heber and McCabe Roads, and continue directly northerly, mid-way between existing Anderholt and Mets Roads to a full new interchange at I-8. This alternative was not selected because it would have reduced operational capacity due to utilizing a portion of SR-98 that lacks access control. With the anticipated volume and mix of truck traffic and turn moves necessary at the intersections along Route 98, this alternative would not provide access to I-8 for through traffic as efficiently as the Preferred Alternative. As future traffic volumes increased, an air quality hot spot would occur at the junction of Route 7 and Route 98. This would require either the purchase and displacement of up to five additional residences, or construction of direct connector ramps between Route 98 and Route 7 to improve traffic flow and eliminate the hot spot. Similar to Alternative 4, the ability to drain stormwater runoff from Alternative 4A would be more restricted on the west side of Heber Dunes Park because of the distance to the Alamo River. Furthermore, with the addition of a new interchange at I-8, this alternative would be less cost effective than the preferred alternative.

No Build Alternative

In addition to the above project alternatives, a no build alternative was studied. The No Build Alternative would allow continued use of the current route between the East Calexico Port of Entry, existing Route 7 and Interstate 8 with no further major improvements.

The No Build Alternative does not meet the purpose and need for the proposed project. It would not accommodate projected traffic volumes to and from the new Port of Entry, nor would it provide relief to traffic congestion on Route 111 and Route 98 within the urbanized Calexico area. More importantly the no build alternative would hinder the movement of goods and services through the region. Congestion would continue to increase on both regional and local facilities with the No Build Alternative (year 2020), including Routes 98 and 111. The No Build Alternative is inconsistent with the Regional Transportation Plan and the Regional Transportation Improvement Program, both developed by Southern California Associate of Governments (SCAG). It is also inconsistent with the Imperial County General Plan Circulation Element. Given these concerns, the no-build alternative is not supported, and is unacceptable.

In addition to the No Build Alternative, one operational alternative (Toll Road Alternative) and modal alternatives (Mass Transit and Transportation Systems Management Alternatives) were also assessed at the beginning of the planning process. The Toll Road Alternative was withdrawn from further analysis when sufficient funding was identified in the 1998 STIP to entirely fund the project, alleviating the need to raise funds through tolls. The Mass Transit

Alternative and Transportation Systems Management Alternatives were dismissed because neither addressed specific goals of the project.

The Preferred Alternative

The following discussion explains the rationale for choosing the Preferred Alternative. The Preferred Alternative was also identified as the Least Environmentally Damaging Practicable Alternative during the NEPA/404 Concurrence Process.

After full consideration of the comments received on the Draft EIS/EIR and coordination with federal and State resource/regulatory agencies, a Preferred Alternative for the Route 7 Expressway project was identified on March 18, 1999. Alternative 1 - Orchard Road Alignment was identified as the Preferred Project based upon environmental, engineering and traffic circulation factors. This alternative provides the most direct access to Interstate 8 from the East Calexico Port of Entry and it is operationally superior for the movement of goods and services. The only impact not substantially mitigated would be farmland loss. Of the build alternatives considered, Alternative 1 has the least magnitude of impact to farmland acreage because it is the shortest and most direct alignment, paralleling a north/south local road for approximately half of its length. It is also the most cost effective because it utilizes the existing Orchard Road interchange at I-8 and has the least utility costs associated with the relocation of irrigation facilities. These benefits, plus maintaining direct access to Holtville, make this alternative most compatible with the Imperial County General Plan, and the region's transportation plan.

The design of the project is essentially the same as in the Draft EIS/EIR, except for the addition of an overcrossing of the expressway at Hunt Road and addition of roadway drainage facilities. The overcrossing was added to allow expressway crossing of agricultural traffic and livestock in response to comments from the public and coordination with the Imperial County Public Works Department. The drainage facilities include retention and/or detention basins that were incorporated into the project design in response to comments from the US Environmental Protection Agency regarding water quality impacts at the Alamo River. None of these design changes results in new impacts which are significant.

The benefits provided by the Preferred Alternative, as discussed above, outweigh the unavoidable adverse environmental effects. Despite the occurrence of significant environmental effects identified in the Final EIS/EIR, the proposed project (Preferred Alternative Alignment) will be of great benefit to Imperial County.