

TA

CORRESPONDENCE

as of 11-17-2023

From: [Jean Brook](#)
To: [Board \(@smcta.com\)](#)
Cc: [Mike Swire](#)
Subject: FW: SF Chronicle article to share with the Board and CAC
Date: Wednesday, November 15, 2023 10:15:58 AM
Attachments: [chronicle - I lost my job for speaking out against a California freeway widening.pdf](#)

From: Mike Swire <mswire91@gmail.com>
Sent: Tuesday, November 14, 2023 8:42 PM
To: Jean Brook <BrookJ@samtrans.com>
Subject: SF Chronicle article to share with the Board and CAC

ATTENTION: This email came from an external source. Do not open attachments or click on links from unknown senders.

Hi Jean,

Can you please share [the attached SF Chronicle article](#) with the Board and CAC? It concerns spending on highway widening projects.

Thank you,

Mike Swire

Most Popular

- 1.** Czech news crew in S.F. covering APEC robbed at gunpoint while filming...
- 2.** Satellite photos show storm far off the California coast take unusual turn
- 3.** APEC in San Francisco: Muni buses blocked during protest over...
- 4.** Tech layoffs: Amazon announces second round of job cuts in a week
- 5.** An elite private school in Silicon Valley charges \$60,000 for tuition....

[Subscribe](#) [Sign In](#)

OPINION // OPEN FORUM

I lost my job at Caltrans for speaking out against a freeway widening. The rot in our transit planning runs deep

My concerns were repeatedly brushed off by my bosses, who seemed more concerned about getting the next widening project underway than following the law

Jeanie Ward-Waller

Oct. 28, 2023



Listen to this Article

Instaread



Former Caltrans official Jenie Ward-Waller believes a 10-mile section of the Yolo causeway between Davis and Sacramento on Interstate 80 is being illegally widened.
Michael Maloney/The Chronicle 2006

Last month, I was removed from my executive role at California’s Department of Transportation, Caltrans, because I spoke out — again — about the agency’s mindless impulse to add more freeway lanes.

My concerns centered on a large freeway project described to the public as “pavement rehabilitation,” which is repaving. But I believe the project is in fact, an illegal widening of a 10-mile freeway section of the Yolo causeway between Davis and

Sacramento on Interstate 80. After scrutinizing project documents, I realized that Caltrans officials were widening the freeway, using state funds that cannot be used to add lanes. By calling it a “pavement rehab project,” Caltrans avoided public disclosure of the project’s environmental impacts.

My concerns were repeatedly brushed off by my bosses, who seemed more concerned about getting the next widening project underway than they were about ensuring that Caltrans followed the law or considered the future.

NOVEMBER SALE: Get 6 Months of Access for 99¢!

ACT NOW

This is classic legacy-highway-builder thinking, perpetuated by an agency culture that has failed to adapt to tectonic shifts in the transportation industry. Caltrans leaders believe they are widening highways in the public interest despite decades of empirical research proving otherwise. Some Caltrans leaders even believe that they know what the public wants better than the people themselves.

I was the deputy director of planning and modal programs at Caltrans, charged with envisioning California’s future transportation system. In other words, I was responsible for thinking ahead, to consider the state’s projected growth and to plan for disruptions like climate change. I set policy for Caltrans to improve travel options, reduce environmental impact and address harm to those communities negatively impacted by freeways. And let’s be clear: Freeways have negative impacts.

ADVERTISEMENT
Article continues below this ad

Car dependence was once a glittering symbol of freedom and progress in California. Today, congestion causes millions of families to lose significant portions of their day in traffic. The lie that we have been told for too long is that more freeways will help. The truth? Expanding roads only makes things worse.

Most freeway widening projects will not result in sustainable public benefits. Most of the time, adding lanes ends up worsening traffic. Sometimes, the impact is almost immediate, such as the [well-publicized](#) new lane on I-405 in Los Angeles.

It is easy to understand why: More people choose to drive routes where additional space is created. This phenomenon, known as induced demand, has been acknowledged by state law since 2013 and is well documented on [Caltrans’ website](#).

If you build it, too many will come.

Highway expansion is also incredibly costly — beyond the hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars typically spent per project. Expansions ultimately increase emissions that exacerbate climate change and pollute nearby neighborhoods. Freeways also have a long history of displacing and dividing communities. For example, the construction of I-580, I-880 and I-980 destroyed

huge swaths of Oakland’s communities of color and segregated them from downtown and white neighborhoods in the hills. Widening any of those freeways today would destroy more homes and businesses in neighborhoods that are still suffering.

ADVERTISEMENT
Article continues below this ad

That’s why there is a [growing movement](#) to tear I-980 down.

In lieu of widening freeways, Caltrans should spend those billions on solutions that will provide long-term improvement to travel. These solutions include expanding rail and bus service, and giving buses priority on roadways so they aren’t stuck in traffic. Making public transit convenient, safe and attractive would provide families with real alternatives to driving. It’s equally important to invest in making streets safer to walk and bike, and to connect people easily to a train or bus so they can opt to drive less or not at all.

No single solution to our transportation challenges is a silver bullet. The system is exceedingly complex, and it will take time and significant investment before alternatives to driving will be as convenient.

Our freeway system is not going away anytime soon. We need Caltrans to maintain it. But we can do so more effectively without expanding freeways while investing significantly more in travel options that don’t involve driving.

About Opinion

Guest opinions in **Open Forum and Insight** are produced by writers with expertise, personal experience or original insights on a subject of interest to our readers. Their **views do not necessarily reflect** the opinion of The Chronicle editorial board, which is committed to providing a diversity of ideas to our readership.

[Read more about our transparency and ethics policies](#) →

To advance these solutions, Caltrans needs a total overhaul. Too many have ascended at Caltrans who have proved that they cannot implement structural change and want to keep California on the same, congested path. I spent six years beating the drum of reform, but I crashed into the so-called “green ceiling” — resistance to thinking greener and to modernizing not just how we build roads, but how we think about road use.

My green ceiling was also a glass ceiling. Though I am a trained engineer, my ideas were routinely dismissed or diminished. Were they unpopular because I was “too emotional” or “got flustered” or advocated “too aggressively”? I faced all these gendered criticisms during my tenure.

Or was it because I had the temerity to ask critical questions about the legitimacy of widening yet another highway? The two are related. I embodied an existential threat to the male, highway-builder culture.

I don't plan on being silenced about either.

I know how important it is to hold the government accountable. Taxpayer funds must be used for their intended purpose. Just as important is that we are honest with the public about what we know to be the true benefits and impacts of transportation projects.

Jeanie Ward-Waller is a licensed professional engineer and former deputy director for planning and modal programs at Caltrans.

Sign up for the Morning Fix newsletter

Top headlines from The Chronicle's newsroom

Email

SIGN UP

By signing up, you agree to our Terms of use and acknowledge that your information will be used as described in our Privacy Policy.

Written By

Jeanie Ward-Waller

[VIEW COMMENTS](#)

Top of the News