

May 15, 2020

Benicia City Council  
c/o City Clerk  
(via email)



**RE: Re: Public Comment for the May 19, 2020 Benicia City Council Agenda: Request Caltrans Replant the Trees Removed from the Freeways in Benicia**

For many years Caltrans has been removing the trees they have planted on Benicia's freeways, and has no plans to replace them. So far efforts by citizens and the Benicia Tree Foundation to get Caltrans to protect the remaining trees and replace the lost trees have been futile. We request the City Council discuss this matter as soon as possible and consider the following facts.

Caltrans is currently removing a substantial number of trees along I-780 and I-680 as part of a \$9.73 million project to remove dead or dying drought-damaged trees in four North Bay counties. The purpose is to address potential safety and fire issues, according to the Caltrans State Highway Operation and Preservation Program, which is a \$17 billion four-year budget to fund Caltrans operation and maintenance projects.

In 2005, Caltrans removed over 400 diseased eucalyptuses along I-780. At that time Caltrans indicated this landscaping would be replaced as a separate project, subject to the availability of funding. In 2007, Caltrans adopted a Highway Planting Restoration Project Study Report for I-780 which proposed to rehabilitate the landscaping and replace irrigation on 45 acres of right-of-way through Benicia for \$3.5 million (2007 dollars).

Up to this point, Caltrans has failed to fund this planting project. The report included this description of the landscaping problem.

"At a 10/18/05 Open House, Benicia residents supported the removal of declining trees due to the potential fire risk, but some urged conservative removal followed by replanting with less susceptible trees. Department staff told the public that there is a potential planting restoration project planned. Most shrub and ground cover plants have died. Landscaped Freeway classification may be revoked if planting is not replaced at certain locations, which would then allow billboard placement. Remaining planting along the route does not give a sense of arrival or orientation when visiting historic, recreational or other destinations in Benicia"

One bright spot in recent memory with Caltrans' stewardship of their right-of-way was landscaping of the I-680/I-780 interchange in 2011, which included planting over 1,400 trees. This landscaping was part of the new bridge project funded by tolls. Since completion of that construction contract however, the trees have been abandoned.

Re: Item to include on a future City Council Agenda – Request Caltrans Replant the Trees Removed from the Freeways in Benicia

The Benicia Tree Foundation has been concerned about the condition of Caltrans' trees and their ability to contribute to our City's image and environment. The City's General Plan identifies I-780 and I-680 as our "gateways". The City regulates the removal, alteration and planting of trees for the public's health, safety and welfare. Trees serve important functions of cleaning our air and water, capturing greenhouse gases, providing wildlife habitat and reducing summertime temperatures in our urban areas.

Seeing what was happening to the Caltrans trees, the Benicia Tree Foundation sought permission from Caltrans in 2018 through its Adopt-a-Highway Program to plant trees on Caltrans right-of-way. Caltrans rejected that request, saying there was insufficient staff to maintain more trees.

With Caltrans' reluctance to replace the trees it has removed, the Benicia Tree Foundation sought permission in 2019 to maintain the trees they planted in the I-680/I-780 interchange area through the Adopt-a-Highway Program. Caltrans rejected that request saying the area was unsafe for volunteers.

In recent years Caltrans has received significant boosts in revenue. A 17.6 cent per gallon gas tax increase was authorized by SB 1 in 2017. This law also requires the gas tax be adjusted annually for inflation. Regional Measure 3 increased bridge tolls by \$1 on January 1, 2019, with additional \$1 increases in 2022 and 2025.

The only impact we have seen locally from these revenue increases is accelerated removal of trees along our freeways. Caltrans has been unable to accept participation from local non-profit organizations in tree planting and maintenance, although Caltrans developed the Adopt-a-Highway program for that purpose.

Yes, our community is dealing with many important issues now, but to see what Caltrans is doing demands some type of acknowledgement that this matters. As our City representatives, we request that you consider asking Caltrans to replace the trees removed from the freeway in Benicia.

Steven Goetz, Secretary  
Benicia Tree Foundation  
Board of Directors