



YOSEMITE

INTO THE 21st CENTURY

Yosemite National Park Planning Update

Volume 6, Spring 1997

"Though of such stupendous depth, these canyons are not gloomy gorges, savage and inaccessible. With rough passages here and there they are flowery pathways conducting to the snowy, ice fountains; mountain streets full of life and light, graded and sculptured by the ancient glaciers, and presenting throughout their courses a rich variety of novel and attractive scenery - the most attractive that has yet been discovered in the mountain ranges of the world."
John Muir, *The Yosemite*

Dear Friends of Yosemite:

As you know, the January flood severely damaged much of the El Portal Road (the portion of Highway 140 inside the Park) from the park boundary to the Pohono Bridge at the east end of Yosemite Valley. Like at Yosemite Lodge and the campgrounds, the damage to the El Portal Road gives us the opportunity to make improvements in order to reach the goals of the 1980 General Management Plan (GMP).



The GMP calls for the reduction of congestion in Yosemite Valley. To facilitate that, the Park is encouraging the creation of a regional transportation system. With such a system in place, it will be necessary to ac-

commodate an increased number of buses entering the Park. As it was before the flood, the El Portal Road's nine-foot lanes poorly accommodated the bus traffic already on it: it was impossible for a bus to remain to the right of the center line while traveling this road. Park and Federal Highway Administration planners have been developing a draft plan for improving the safety of this road since shortly after the flood and the start of emergency repairs. This week, we are releasing for public review the draft Environmental Assessment for the Improvement of the El Portal Road.

The emergency repairs well underway on the road are expected to be completed by the start of the Memorial Day weekend. In the meantime, we have opened the road to limited evening and Saturday access between Yosemite Valley and El Portal. Once the emergency repairs are completed, the road will be reopened without restriction through the Labor Day weekend. Then, permanent repairs will then commence, but with greater public access than we could provide during the emergency repair phase.

This road has experienced twice the number of vehicle accidents of any other road in the Park, and ten times as many accidents involving buses. With the implementation of future transportation plans resulting in increased bus traffic from neighboring communities, the long-term improvements are essential for safe visitor access. As we improve the road's safety, we are also determined to

The draft Environmental Assessment for the Improvement of the El Portal Road is available for public review from May 7, 1997 to June 7, 1997. It and other planning documents and Updates are available on the Internet at: www.nps.gov/yose or by calling (209) 372-0529 or 372-0265.

Copies have also been mailed to local and regional libraries, including Mariposa, Oakhurst, Merced ("O" Street), and Fresno (Mariposa Street).

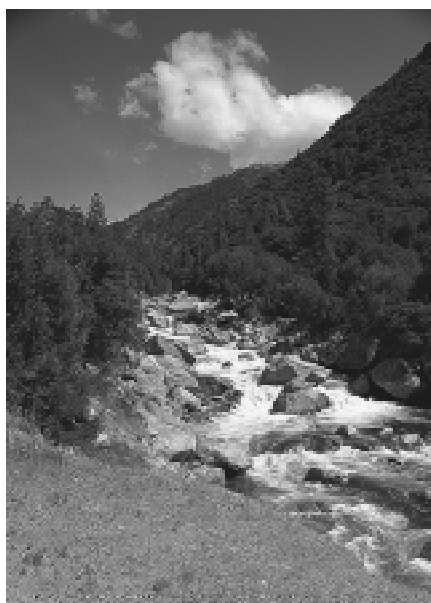
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maintain its historic, park-like character and to protect the Merced River's wild and scenic status. During the emergency repair phase of work, we are developing a standard of design and construction fashioned to replicate the look and feel - the scale, vegetation, and texture - of the present roadscape. This standard will guide the design and construction of the long-term improvements. Many of you have already been discussing your concerns with us, including the preservation of the road's character, the accommodation of a regional transportation system, periods of closure during construction, and others. We have considered each of these issues in the plan and assessment.

Some details of the plan are highlighted here. Once again, we look forward to seeing your comments.



B.J. Griffin
Superintendent

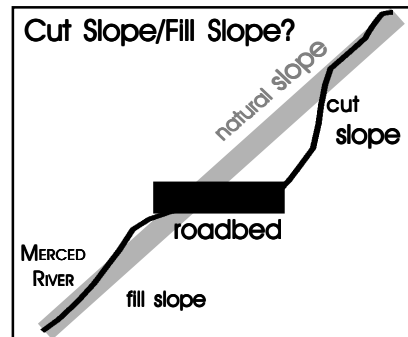


El Portal Road parallels the Wild and Scenic Merced River as it flows through the Merced River Gorge.

THE EL PORTAL ROAD

Being one of only three roadways providing access to Yosemite Valley, the El Portal Road handles a quarter of the traffic entering Yosemite National Park. The roadway is sometimes the only access to Yosemite Valley during the winter months when snow and ice are prevalent at higher elevations on the two other entrance roads. The January flood damaged the El Portal Road in twenty one locations and weakened it in at least thirty others. Erosion destabilized many sections of the guardwall, roadbed, and fill slope.

The El Portal Road today is essentially the same as it was in the 1920s, a two-lane roadway with nine-foot lanes and a one-foot shoulder. Over the last 65 years, the road has sustained serious flood damage seven times, damaging bridges, roadbed and pavement, guardwall, and



drainage features. The gutter and culverts are inadequate to accommodate the volume of drainage from rain and snow. The pavement is in fair condition, but is failing in some locations and is nearing the end of its useful life. The guardwall does not meet crash test safety standards. The lane width, lateral clearance (space between the outside lane edge and adjacent hazards), and curve sharp-



Emergency repair is underway to open the El Portal Road prior to the start of Memorial Day Weekend.

ness are all incapable of safely accommodating today's large vehicles and contribute to the road's high accident record.

The proposed improvements include: widening travel lanes; repaving the road; rebuilding the guardwall with simulated rock or a combination of simulated rock with granite veneer; increasing lateral clearance by removing rock from the cut slope; decreasing curve sharpness by realigning the roadway; and improving road drainage by constructing a drainage ditch and increasing the size and number of culverts. These changes would improve roadway safety by enhancing the ability of all drivers, especially of buses, RVs, and trucks, to keep their vehicle to the right of the centerline. They would also improve structural integrity and strengthen the road sufficiently to withstand future flooding.



Road access is currently restricted on the El Portal Road due to flood recovery construction.



The January flood damaged guardwall, roadbed, and fill slope along the El Portal Road.

The El Portal Road today is essentially the same as it was in the 1920s, a two-lane roadway with nine-foot lanes and a one-foot shoulder.



Existing culverts are inadequate in size and number to accommodate flow volume from precipitation.



The existing narrow lane width, short line of sight around curves, and close proximity of rock to the pavement make it difficult for drivers to keep vehicles in their lane.



During the proposed reconstruction, the guardwall would be rebuilt. Construction materials still under consideration include molded concrete (formliner, shown here) and a combination of hand-laid granite and formliner.

The Draft Environmental Assessment for the Improvement of the El Portal Road

The draft assessment evaluates the potential environmental impacts of three alternatives:

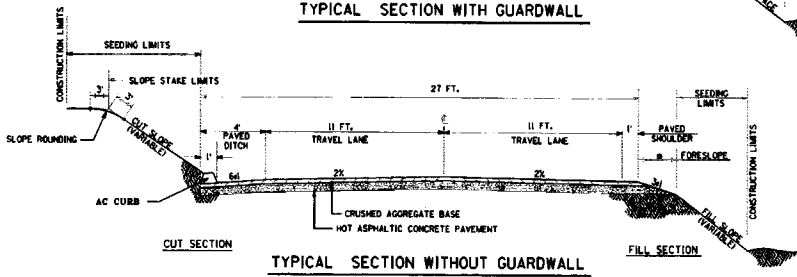
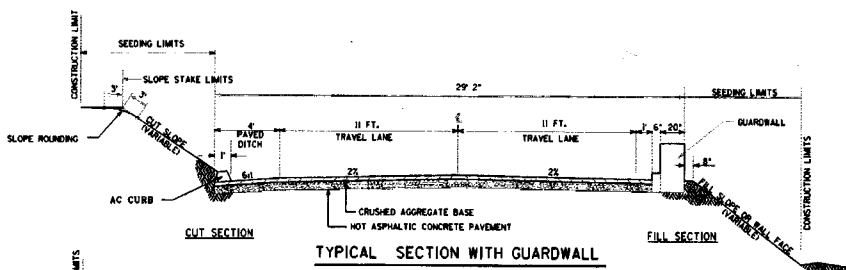
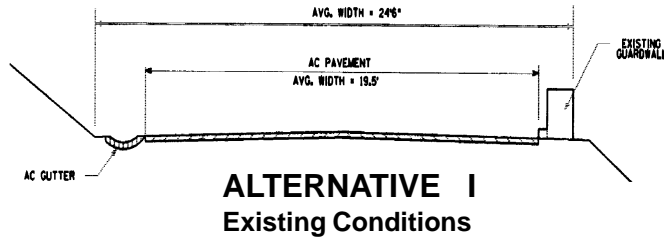
(1) no action -- road width remains as it was pre-flood, with its two 9-foot lanes and a 1-foot shoulder; only repairs and emergency improvements made

(2) the proposed alternative -- replacement of the guardwall and reconstruction of the road to include a 4-foot drainage ditch and two 11-foot travel lanes

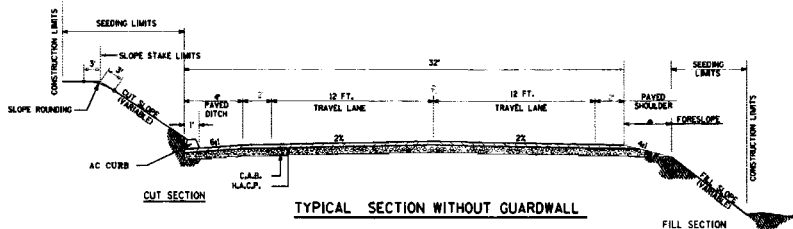
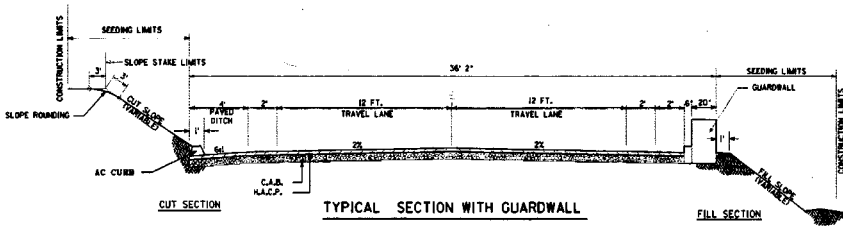
(3) replacement of the guardwall and reconstruction of the road to include a four-foot drainage ditch, two 12-foot travel lanes, and two 2-foot paved shoulders

Other actions evaluated include additional rest room facilities near Cascades, redesigning the El Portal Road / Big Oak Flat Road intersection, and relocating the Arch Rock entrance station.

The draft Environmental Assessment evaluates the environmental consequences of the road work on natural resources (e.g., wildlife habitat and sensitive plant species, air and water quality), cultural resources such as potentially historic aspects of the road (guardwall, culverts, stone foundations, retaining walls, and trails), visitor use including scenic values, and socio-economics (e.g., the effect on local and regional economies)



ALTERNATIVE II Proposed Alternative



ALTERNATIVE III

Flood Recovery Update

Off the Road: flood-related projects besides the El Portal Road currently in the works...

The Park has projected phasing plans for two flood recovery projects. Here are early projections for the sequence of events for Yosemite Lodge and the campgrounds. (Phases of same number under the two projects would not necessarily take place at the same time.)



Yosemite Lodge (subject to approval of the draft Yosemite Lodge Area Development Concept Plan Environmental Assessment _ now on public review)

Phase 1 Demolish flood damaged buildings; design circulation, infrastructure and structures; restore vegetation in the floodplain.

Phase 2 Construct new road, bicycle, and pedestrian circulation along perimeter of the complex and tie back to Northside Drive; construct new parking area for Sunnyside Campground.

Phase 3 Grade site and install new utility lines.

Phase 4 Build employee dormitories and parking.

Phase 5 Build new cabin units and, concurrently or in sequence, motel and cottage units, parking, and pedestrian promenade. Remove roads and center-of-complex parking areas.

Phase 6 Restore and revegetate reclaimed natural areas.

Phase 7 Once traffic is reduced in the east end of Yosemite Valley through Valley Implementation Plan transportation improvements, reduce Northside Drive to one-lane pedestrian and bicycle path, and breach roadbed as needed to allow groundwater flow to meadows.



Campgrounds (subject to approval of the draft Valley Implementation Plan Environmental Impact Statement, expected to be on public review in June)

Phase 1 Demolish and restore Upper and Lower Rivers Campgrounds and damaged Lower Pines Campgrounds loops; design new campgrounds and loops.

Phase 2 Design infrastructure (circulation, water, and sewer) for new camping loops/campgrounds.

Phase 3 Construct new campgrounds/loops at Lamon Orchard, Upper Pines, Group Camp and Tenaya Creek Walk-in Camp; construct entrance station and dump station.

Phase 4 Rebuild campground loops in Upper Pines, Lower Pines, and North Pines Campgrounds.

Phase 5 Design/build camper store at Curry Village (not flood-recovery funded).

STAY INVOLVED!

You are invited to join us with your questions and comments at three open houses regarding the Preliminary Draft Environmental Assessment for Improvements to El Portal Road:

YOSEMITE VALLEY, YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK, CA
EAST AUDITORIUM
THURSDAY, MAY 22, 1997
NOON TO 3:30 P.M.

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA
FORT MASON/GOLDEN GATE
NATIONAL RECREATIONAL AREA
MAY 20, 1997
5:00 P.M. TO 8:30 P.M.

MARIPOSA, CALIFORNIA
COMFORT INN CONFERENCE ROOM
5PM TO 8:30PM
MAY 21, 1997

A critical part of Yosemite's planning process is public involvement. Yosemite National Park is hosting these open houses to involve the public, public agencies, and interested organizations in the preparation of the Environmental Assessment (EA) and to solicit public comment. The open houses will include exhibits about existing road conditions, the proposed action and alternatives, environmental considerations, transportation issues, and construction procedures. Professional staff will be available to answer questions and to accept comments on the draft EA. In addition to the over 1600 invitations to the open houses made through this Planning Update, others will be invited to participate through newspaper articles resulting from Park news releases. Yosemite National Park has also solicited the involvement of interested groups and agencies in the early stages of development of the EA.



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