



Marin County Board of Supervisors
 3501 Civic Center Drive
 San Rafael, CA 94903

March 18, 2024

Subject: Reopening Alto Tunnel

Marin County residents need your help to move forward on a critical project to greatly improve the transportation infrastructure in the region. This project, reopening Alto Tunnel, is perfectly aligned with the county’s climate, sustainability, bicycle, and pedestrian goals.

Curtailing greenhouse gas emissions, improving safety for bicyclists/pedestrians and other non-motorists, and increasing mobility are all stated goals of Marin County.

In 2020 Marin County passed a climate emergency resolution, setting a goal of net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2045. Today, private vehicles represent the single biggest source of emissions in southern/central Marin, and getting people to take their short trips by foot or by bicycle is an important tactic in reducing auto-based emissions. The County has also made clear commitments to reducing roadway injuries and deaths through its “Vision Zero” policy and 2018 Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan.

Mill Valley’s and Corte Madera’s multiuse trails are part of Marin’s North-South Greenway, and are used by many thousands of people a day for transportation and recreation.

The Mill Valley-Sausalito Pathway and the Larkspur-Corte Madera Path are both rails-to-trails projects that follow the former tracks of the Northwestern Pacific Railroad. They provide essential mobility for people traveling outside of a car, keeping bicyclists and pedestrians safe and off of busy streets, all while reducing congestion and greenhouse gas emissions.

Southern and Central Marin are separated by a ridge that discourages travel by bike and prevents convenient travel by foot.

The two rail trails both dead-end into the ridge between Mill Valley and Corte Madera. To traverse this ridge requires several hundred feet of climbing on a busy, narrow road (via Camino Alto), or a 2-mile detour on steep roads to a pathway next to the US 101 freeway (via Horse Hill). Neither route provides an experience comfortable for novice riders or children on bikes, and neither is capable of being an ADA-compliant route for pedestrians or wheelchair users. Any network is only as good as its weakest part, and existing routes present significant barriers to many potential users.

The Alto Tunnel sits under that ridge, and could be opened for bike/pedestrian travel, providing a flat, ADA-compliant route separate from car traffic.

When the railway that served as the basis for the current pathways was built, workers bored a tunnel through the ridge. This tunnel, rehabilitated and reopened as a multiuse path, would transform active travel in Southern and Central Marin. Travel between Edna McGuire Elementary School in Mill Valley and Menke Park in Corte Madera would go from a 20-minute, hilly bike ride (or an hour-long walk) to a 7-minute flat ride or 25-minute stroll, less than a third of it actually inside the tunnel. For all the children and adults who need to travel outside of a car, this would represent a massive improvement.

The Cal Park Hill Tunnel, reopened to the public in 2010, unlocked active travel between San Rafael and Larkspur.

Marin is no stranger to such a project. Another 19th Century tunnel only two miles distant was reopened to bike/pedestrian travel in the last decade. That tunnel similarly removed the need for users to travel over a steep, heavily-trafficked hill. It is now used by many hundreds of people a day, half of them pedestrians who had no viable route between San Rafael and Larkspur prior to the tunnel's reopening.

The Marin County Board of Supervisors should direct staff to take the next steps to open the Alto Tunnel.

Such a step would position Marin to win tens of millions of dollars in state and federal grants, bringing jobs and tax revenue back to the county. The lion's share of the tunnel's cost would be borne by state and federal funding, meaning that Marin would be *receiving* money to build infrastructure that would reduce emissions, relieve traffic, increase mobility, and last for generations to come. If the tunnel is not reopened using these available transportation funds, a significant project will still be required to prevent further collapse of the tunnel and associated damage to properties and roadways in the area, but would need to be paid for with local funds.

Reopening Alto Tunnel would be a clear victory for the people of Marin, and we ask the Board of Supervisors and local city councils for their full support.

Sincerely,

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