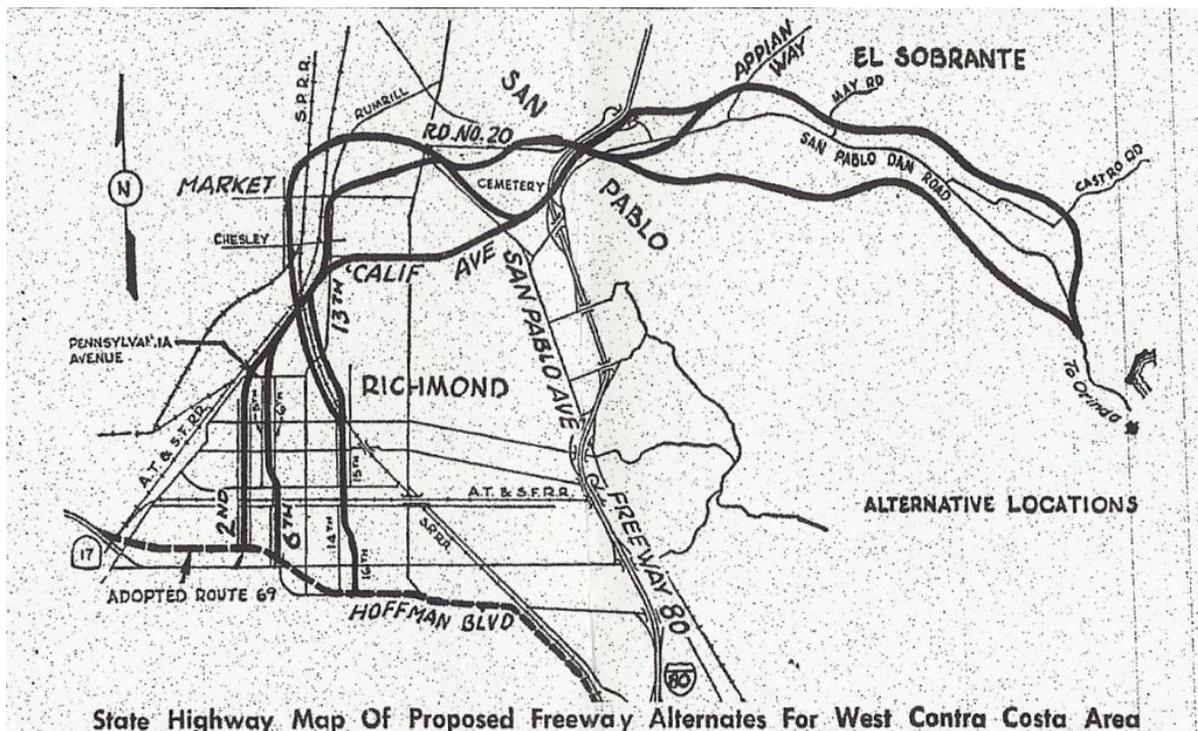


## EL SOBRANTE VALLEY'S ALMOST FREEWAY

By Maurice P. Abraham; July 28, 2011

What? A freeway through our beautiful valley? Yes, it might have been. In the early 1960s a plan to construct a freeway through El Sobrante was gaining steam at the State level. The State legislature had authorized the state's transportation agency (CalTrans) to begin the planning process for what was known then as Legislative Route 254. Route 254 was to link the Richmond San Rafael Bridge to Highway 24 at Orinda. San Pablo Dam Road was viewed by CalTrans as an important link between these two points, and significant increases in traffic was projected in years to come.

Planning for Route 254 was first announced by CalTrans in October 1961, yet over two years would pass before preliminary route alternatives would be publically presented by the agency. In February 1964, CalTrans held its first public meeting to present the preliminary alternative route plans to local residents and City and County officials and to seek their feedback. Four alternatives were being considered through the cities of Richmond and San Pablo. These routes connected to two alternatives through El Sobrante; Alternate C which traversed the valley southerly of San Pablo Creek, and Alternate D which followed a course northerly of the Creek.



*The above illustration shows the two alternative route locations that were proposed through El Sobrante; Alternate D on the north side of San Pablo Dam Road (crossing Appian Way, May Road and Castro Road) and Alternate C on the south side of San Pablo Dam Road. (Photo from the El Sobrante Herald newspaper, January 9, 1964)*

The proposals received mixed reactions in El Sobrante, but Alternative C garnered support over Alternate D. El Sobrante's Chamber of Commerce, Business and Professional Men's Association and Improvement Club all endorsed Alternate C, as did the now-defunct El Sobrante Valley Council. Local resident Alvin Hightower of the La Honda Bowl area, obtained signatures of some 350 residents opposed to the "D" route and supportive of the "C" route.

Aside from obvious degradation of the natural environment, Alternate D was seen by many opponents as a structural barrier that would physically divide a community that enjoyed the clearly defined physical identity of its valley setting. Such a division would have limited pedestrian and vehicular interconnectivity between the two halves of the divided community, unleashing potential social and environmental implications one could only imagine.

On the positive side, the southerly Alternate C would create a bypass route around the business district and was seen as a way to improve accessibility, reduce through traffic and make driving, parking and walking in the shopping area safer and more convenient. It was felt that an environment more conducive to shopping would result, bringing in more shoppers and enhancing the business district's prospects as a viable community retail center.

While both Richmond and El Sobrante supported certain routes proposed by CalTrans, the City of San Pablo was not satisfied. City leaders were rightly concerned that all proposed routes bisected their community in one way or another. In April 1964 San Pablo proposed an alternate "S" route that would bypass to the north of their city through what was then "Tank Farm Hill" (north of Hilltop Mall). However, the San Pablo proposal would have impacted the El Sobrante community in the same way the CalTrans routes would have San Pablo; it would have cut a destructive path through El Sobrante from the Richmond Parkway interchange to Valley View Road at the Appian Way "curve". From there it would have followed Valley View Road to San Pablo Dam Road in the vicinity of Kennedy Grove park area.

Like Alternate D, the San Pablo proposal would have created a physical barrier through the heart of the El Sobrante community dividing it in half. Not surprisingly, El Sobrante leaders found San Pablo's Alternative S proposal completely unacceptable. By now both sides were at loggerheads and the need for compromise was sounded by then County Supervisor, Al Dias.

The El Sobrante Chamber of Commerce stepped up and took on the issue. Under the auspices of the Chamber, a committee of local leaders was appointed to explore alternative routing that might bridge the differences between the goals of San Pablo and the El Sobrante community. Two Chamber members, architect John Wilson and land planner, Maurice Abraham (author of this article), volunteered their expertise to developing a compromise route. They devised an alternative that would connect San Pablo's proposed route "S" to the CalTrans route "C", roughly paralleling current Interstate 80 through what is now Rolling Hills Cemetery. This plan,

designated Alternate SC, was ultimately deemed unacceptable by CalTrans, most likely due to conflicts with Interstate 80 ingress-egress points.

Following several additional public meetings and discussions between CalTrans, County officials and local leaders, irreconcilable differences between the San Pablo and El Sobrante communities ultimately killed the proposed freeway. CalTrans had warned on multiple occasions that they would not proceed unless all affected local governments, Contra Costa County (El Sobrante) and the cities of Richmond and San Pablo could agree on a route. Such an agreement was not to be.

Today, one can only imagine how different El Sobrante would be today had either the C or SC route been constructed. Construction of either route would have reduced traffic on the entire length of San Pablo Dam Road through the community. Through traffic between Interstate 80 and Highway 24 in Orinda would have shifted to the new freeway, thus easing the impact of non-local traffic on the Dam Road business district and other local streets.

As a result of this shift, it is likely the Dam Road business district would have evolved in a much different way. As a more pedestrian-friendly district, oriented more to lower-speed shopping traffic, it may have proven more attractive to developers of retail shops, professional offices and restaurants. In turn, these would have made it more attractive for complimentary higher density housing within the district, thereby creating a desirable and livable mixed use center.

However, whether or not El Sobrante's business district would have evolved into a viable commercial center is questionable. The district's long-entrenched development and ownership patterns make it difficult, at best, to aggregate small parcels in order to accommodate larger developments. Additionally, migration of retailers to newer retail concepts such as Hilltop Mall, followed later by "big box store" centers like Pinole's Fitzgerald Drive, were deciding factors in the Dam Road business district changes since the early 1960's.

Conversely, such a major facility would have left a major footprint on the San Pablo Ridge hillsides. Construction grading would have moved massive amounts of earth and hundreds of stately trees, many of them oak, severely impacting the natural character of these hillsides. The freeway also would have further restricted access to the upper hillside trails and open space, as freeway crossing structures would have been few.

So, is the El Sobrante community better off today than if the freeway had been constructed? It's a complex question, the answer to which one can only speculate. It's also an answer that is certain to be as varied as the opinions and values of El Sobrante's residents.