

CHAPTER 1

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR PROJECT

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The environmental review, consultation, and any other action required in accordance with applicable federal laws for this project is being, or has been carried out by the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) under its assumption of responsibility pursuant to 23 USC 327.

Caltrans, in coordination with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), proposes to widen and realign State Route 76 (SR-76) in northern San Diego County from Melrose Drive in eastern Oceanside to South Mission Road in Bonsall. The project proposes a four-lane conventional highway with right-of-way and grading to accommodate a possible future widening if justified. The total length of the project is approximately 9.4 kilometers (5.8 miles). SR-76 is a two-lane highway that is over capacity and subject to traffic congestion and travel delays. Figures 1.1-1 and 1.1-2 at the end of this chapter show the project's location and vicinity, respectively.

The SR-76 project is included in the fiscal year (FY) 2006/2011 Federal Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (FSTIP) and is funded from the following programs: Demonstration; Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (DEMO - TEA 21); High Priority Project (HPP) - Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Act – A Legacy for Users [SAFETEA-LU]- Demo); High Priority Project - Advanced Construction (HPP AC); Regional Surface Transportation Program (RSTP); and Surface Transportation Program (STP). The San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) administers a local sales tax measure, TransNet II, which is also contributing to this project's funding.

The project is consistent with the 2030 San Diego Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) 2007 update approved by the SANDAG Board of Directors on November 30, 2007, and fully funded and found to be conforming by FHWA and the Federal Transit Authority (FTA) on December 10, 2007. The project is also in SANDAG's 2006/2011 Regional Transportation Improvement Program (RTIP) (MPO ID CAL29) Amendment 9, page 14, which was found to be conforming by FHWA and FTA on December 10, 2007. The design concept and scope of the proposed project is consistent with the project description in the 2007 RTP, the 2006 RTIP, and the assumptions in the SANDAG regional emissions analysis.

1.2 PROJECT PURPOSE

The purpose of the project is to maintain or improve the existing and future traffic operations in the SR-76 corridor, between Melrose Drive and South Mission Road, in order to improve the safe and efficient local and regional movement of people and goods, while minimizing environmental and community impacts for the planning design year of 2030.

The objectives of this project are to:

- Maintain or improve future traffic levels of service in 2030 over the existing levels of service;
- Maintain or improve travel times within the corridor;
- Provide a facility that is compatible with future transit and other modal options;
- Provide consistency with the 2030 San Diego Regional Transportation Plan update, SANDAG, 2007 (SANDAG 2030 RTP) where feasible and in compliance with federal and state regulations;
- Maintain the facility as an effective link in the intraregional and interregional movement of people and goods; and
- Protect and/or enhance the human and natural environment along the SR-76 corridor.

1.3 PROJECT NEED

1.3.1 Population Growth, Intraregional, and Interregional Traffic Demand

This project has been identified in the 2030 RTP approved by SANDAG in 2007. The project was previously identified as a needed improvement by SANDAG in 1994 and 2003 RTP documents. The project was identified as a cornerstone of a local transportation sales tax measure (TransNet) passed in 1988. In November 2004, an extension of this local sales tax measure (TransNet II) was passed by voters, and as part of this extension has been designated as an “early action Tier 1 project.” One of the aspects of TransNet II is the designation that projects within this corridor result in a “net benefit” in addition to project-related mitigation requirements. The proposed project would also incorporate the seven policy goals identified in the “Transportation Vision” established in the RTP:

- Mobility – improve the mobility of people and freight
- Accessibility – improve accessibility to major employment and regional centers
- Reliability – improve the reliability and safety of the transportation system
- Efficiency – Maximize the efficiency of the existing and future transportation systems
- Livability – Promote livable communities
- Sustainability – Minimize effects on the environment
- Equity – Ensure an equitable distribution of the benefits among various demographics and user groups

SR-76 is a heavily used, east-west-oriented, two-lane conventional highway serving intraregional, interregional, commuter, and recreational traffic from Interstate 5 (I-5) through Interstate 15 (I-15), terminating at State Route 79 (SR-79). Continued growth in northern San Diego County (including casino development) together with substantial growth in southern Riverside County have led to higher than average annual increases in traffic on SR-76. Between 1997 and 2004, traffic increased at an annual rate of 5.2 percent between Olive Hill Road and South Mission Road, from 26,000 Average Daily Traffic (ADT) to 37,000 ADT, respectively. In addition, between 1997 and 2004, traffic increased by more than 10 percent annually along

SR-76 between North Santa Fe Road and East Vista Way, from 21,200 ADT to 42,000 ADT, respectively.

Based upon regional projections in the SANDAG 2030 RTP, increases in growth and traffic are expected to continue into the foreseeable future. SANDAG, the City of Oceanside, the County of San Diego, and the unincorporated communities of Bonsall and Fallbrook have all expressed an urgent desire to reduce traffic congestion, promote greater regional mobility, and improve user safety, while minimizing the effects of the project on the environment and local communities.

During peak periods, SR-76 from Melrose Drive to South Mission Road is typically congested. As a result, much of the local community does not patronize the businesses in the area during peak hours. With limited local mail delivery, most Bonsall residents must visit the local post office to receive their daily mail. The post office is located in a strip shopping center fronting SR-76 near Olive Hill Road. The elementary school in the Bonsall community is located adjacent to the river and SR-76 at the intersection with Camino Del Rey. With limited bus service available to students, most children are transported to school by parents using the state highway. The two daily activities of school and postal access add to the traffic volumes and daily congestion on SR-76 through the Bonsall town center.

The existing highway corridor, within the project limits, is a non-access-controlled two-lane conventional highway with five at-grade, signalized intersections, as well as multiple private access points. In Bonsall, the two local shopping centers (Bonsall Village Center at Olive Hill Road and River Village Center at South Mission Road) contribute to the high level of congestion in the eastern portion of the project corridor.

The County of San Diego Parks and Recreation Department is developing a proposed River Park Master Plan to extend from the old Bonsall Bridge easterly to I-15. The proposed SR-76 project and the Draft River Park Master Plan project are being developed concurrently, thus providing an opportunity to coordinate mitigation and enhancement of the river valley between the two agencies. The park project is in the preliminary planning stage and the partner agencies are working to identify lands for environmental mitigation and to provide a compatible connection between park uses and access to the proposed highway.

1.3.2 Corridor Traffic Demand

Significant increases in population are anticipated in the next 20 to 25 years for the cities and unincorporated northern part of San Diego County and southwestern Riverside county. Over the next 20 years, the population in the Fallbrook area is expected to increase by 62 percent while the population in the Pauma and Valley Center communities along SR-76 and east of I-15 is expected to increase by 146 percent. In aggregate, the population of the cities and communities of Fallbrook, Bonsall, Vista, Oceanside, and Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton is expected to increase by a total of 321,000 people over the next 20 years.

In the southwestern Riverside County area, the populations of the cities of Lake Elsinore, Murrieta, Perris, Temecula, Hemet, and San Jacinto are expected to increase by 141 percent over the next 20 years. This figure does not include population increases for the unincorporated areas of southwestern Riverside County.

Commercial truck traffic in this portion of SR-76 currently averages 7.4 percent of the ADT. For year 2030 traffic forecasting purposes, truck trips are expected to remain at 6.5 to 7.5 percent of the total ADT.

In the 2030 design year, SR-76 would operate at a heavily congested Level of Service (LOS) F from Melrose Drive to I-15 for the No Build Alternative. Despite this fact, there is clearly greater existing congestion and higher increases in demand and congestion for the near term between Melrose Drive and South Mission Road when compared to South Mission Road to I-15. The portion of SR-76 between Melrose Drive and South Mission Road serves local, regional (North San Diego County), and interregional trips. The majority of existing trips either originate from, or are destined to, regional and local sources. Local and regional trips are defined as trips coming from within San Diego County while interregional trips are defined as those coming from southwestern Riverside County and Orange County.

An analysis was performed in November 2006 using the SANDAG regional transportation model to determine the areas where trips on the portion of SR-76 immediately east and west of South Mission Road were originating from and destined to. The data from the analysis clearly identifies two key findings. First, the great majority (52,875 [81 percent]) of the trips along this portion of SR-76 are from within San Diego County; approximately 16 percent are from southwestern Riverside County and 3 percent are from Orange County. Second, along SR-76, there is a distinct difference in the traffic volumes west of South Mission Road versus east of South Mission Road. The analysis indicates that there are nearly 46,000 trips on SR-76 east of South Mission Road versus 65,200 trips on SR-76 west of South Mission Road. Of this difference (19,200 trips), 17,925 (93 percent) of these trips are from the cities and communities of Fallbrook, Bonsall, Oceanside, Vista, Carlsbad, and Camp Pendleton.

1.3.3 Existing Circulation System and Infrastructure Constraints

Currently, SR-76 serves a variety of user groups and a diverse range of both local and regional needs. The corridor serves commuter traffic from rural areas, together with the growing urban communities of southern Riverside County. It serves as the prime arterial for the local rural community while also serving travelers between Fallbrook, Vista, and Oceanside. SR-76 also serves the tourist trade and travelers to multiple casinos and the coastal communities. Future regional plans shall place a further burden on the corridor to serve as a key corridor for commercial goods movement as well as serving the area's rich agricultural industry. It is logical that the proposed project terminates at South Mission Road and focuses on SR-76 to the west.

West of the project limits, the SR-76 corridor was upgraded from a two-lane conventional highway to a four-lane expressway through Oceanside in 1999. Within the proposed project

limits, at the SR-76/Olive Hill Road intersection, a project to improve the signal operations by adding longer turn pockets and additional through lanes was completed in 2005.

State Highways

- State Route 78 (SR-78) is located approximately 8.05 to 19.31 kilometers (5 to 12 miles) to the south of SR-76 and is the principal east-west freeway for northern San Diego County, linking I-5 with I-15 to the east. There is extensive commercial development along SR-78.
- State Route 56 (SR-56) is located 29 kilometers (18 miles) south of SR-76 and is another east-west corridor that connects I-5 with I-15 to the east.
- State Route 74 (SR-74) is located between 19 and 32 kilometers (12 and 20 miles) north of SR-76 and is currently a two-lane conventional highway connecting Orange and Riverside Counties.

Major Arterials

- Gopher Canyon Road is parallel to and located between 9.6 kilometers (6 miles) south to immediately adjacent to SR-76.

Other Routes/Options

- The Sprinter is a light rail line that parallels SR-78 and is located approximately 12 kilometers (7.5 miles) south of SR-76.
- North County Transit District (NCTD) provides bus service along SR-76.

1.3.4 Land Use

The western end of the project is characterized by increasing suburban development. As one moves eastward, the land use types include commercial, residential, agricultural, and open space/park lands. Development within this corridor is occurring rapidly; 19 residential and commercial projects are in the planning and development stage.

1.3.5 Existing Traffic Operations

Within the proposed project limits, the highway currently passes through five signalized intersections: Melrose Drive, East Vista Way, Olive Hill Road, South Mission Road, and North River Road. All five are currently operating above capacity. Minor operational improvements, including turn pockets and localized widening, have been implemented over the past 10 years in an effort to improve operations at these intersections.

SR-76 currently operates at LOS F during the AM and PM peak commute periods and frequently throughout the day on Saturday and Sunday. The morning and evening peak commute periods typically occur between the hours of 7:00 to 9:00 a.m. and 4:00 to 6:00 p.m., respectively. Heavy congestion and time delays are experienced throughout the proposed project corridor during the extended AM/PM commute periods. Traffic queues commonly extend in excess of 1.6 kilometers (1 mile) from the overburdened signalized intersections. The largest contributing factor to this queuing and congestion stems from local trip generation (55 to 65 percent).

SR-76 currently serves a volume of more than 40,000 ADT. This number far exceeds the available capacity of a two-lane conventional highway. Comparing the existing traffic volumes with the projected “No Build” Year 2030 traffic volumes shows that the traffic using this corridor is projected to nearly double.

1.3.6 Corridor Safety

Accident rates on SR-76 currently exceed the statewide average for similar routes. The existing LOS and the heavy congestion has led to annual increases in all types of accidents. Four existing segments, covering this project’s limits, were evaluated using traffic accident data from the Traffic Accident Surveillance and Analysis System (TASAS). A 36-month period from June 2004 to May 2007 was evaluated and results show that the total actual accident rates are above the average for similar statewide facilities. It is anticipated that without any improvements to the facility, the number of accidents would continue to increase as the projected traffic increases.

1.3.7 Mobility and Reliability

The purpose of this project is to reduce congestion, improve mobility, and increase the reliability of the transportation network in the unincorporated region of northern San Diego County and the communities of Bonsall and Fallbrook. A traffic impact analysis was conducted to define any viable options to the proposed SR-76 project. The assumptions and analysis used to determine the needs within this proposed project area included reviewing regional traffic projections from the 2030 RTP, comparing the existing parallel facilities, planned intra- and interregional projects, and reviewing the County of San Diego’s Circulation Element. Regional projections over the next 20 years show this subregional area (Fallbrook, Vista, Oceanside, Camp Pendleton, Valley Center, and Pauma Valley) would see a population increase of 137,000 people, which equates to a 39 percent increase based upon current figures. Within the Fallbrook area, an additional 25,000 people, a 60 percent increase, are expected. Based upon the projected growth, the results of the analysis show that the projected increases in traffic volumes and the regional 2030 transportation needs point to no other viable circulation option other than the proposed SR-76 Melrose Drive to South Mission Road Project.

1.3.8 Environmental Resources

| SR-76 is currently a two-lane conventional highway that begins in Oceanside and traverses through rural communities and mountain recreational areas before terminating near Lake

Henshaw at SR-79. For decades, the San Luis Rey River has been used for sand mining and gravel operations. Over the past 10 years these activities have declined and sand mining and gravel operations do not occur within the project area. The San Luis Rey River is characterized as a river valley that provides habitat for federal and state endangered species and provides a setting for their preservation. The San Luis Rey River corridor has been identified as a critical linkage within San Diego County by the California Wilderness Coalition in “Missing Linkages: Restoring Connectivity to the California Landscape” (www.calwild.org/resources/pubs/linkages2001). Preservation and enhancement of the corridor play a significant role in accomplishing local and regional conservation goals. This river valley offers habitat to federally listed species (coastal California gnatcatcher, arroyo toad, and San Diego ambrosia), state and federally listed wildlife (least Bell’s vireo and southwestern willow flycatcher), and state listed wildlife (Belding’s savannah sparrow and peregrine falcon). In addition, the river valley supports critical habitat for the coastal California gnatcatcher and sensitive wetland communities, including those along adjacent creeks and tributaries.

FHWA’s environmental stewardship goal demonstrates regard for the natural and human environment while addressing the mobility and safety needs of the public. FHWA’s and Caltrans’ environmental policies recognize the need to protect and enhance the quality of life in accordance with environmental, economic, and social goals of the state. Both agencies are mindful of the sensitivity of the San Luis Rey River Valley resources and the ongoing preservation efforts established as a result of state and county agencies and various conservancy groups. Both agencies would try not to impede these efforts and would identify opportunities to offset potential project impacts to the maximum extent practicable.

The protection of these important river valley resources would be a consideration when designing the proposed SR-76 Melrose Drive to South Mission Road Project. Protection of these resources includes the purchase of parcels that could be revegetated and reincorporated into the natural riverine habitat. Enhancements to the sensitive environmental habitat are incorporated where feasible and practicable when considering cost, logistics, and technology.

1.4 PROJECT BACKGROUND

SR-76 was added to the State Highway System in 1933. In 1959, the portion of the route from I-5 to I-15 was added to the Freeway and Expressway System. The freeway routing for this portion was adopted in 1963. The entire length of SR-76 is on the California State Scenic Highway System and is eligible to be designated as an official State Scenic Highway. Freeway agreements with the City of Oceanside and the County of San Diego were executed in 1964 and 1965, respectively.

Historically, SR-76 served relatively low volumes of travel trips. Improvements to SR-76 were previously proposed in 1999, but due to high cost projections; forecasted low traffic demand; concerns for adverse environmental impacts; and resource agency and public opposition, the project was dropped from consideration. In the last several years, rapid residential and

commercial development has added additional traffic to SR-76, which has transformed the facility into a heavily traveled route subject to long delays.

Subsequent to the scoping process and pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), a Notice of Intent (NOI) and Notice of Preparation (NOP) were prepared. The NOI was published in the Federal Register on May 19, 1999. The State Clearinghouse issued the NOP on June 3, 1999, and the review was completed on July 2, 1999. On November 14, 2005, the NOI was republished due to the length of time that had passed since it was originally published and to update the project information within the NOI (see Chapter 5).

A Northern Alternative from Melrose Drive to I-15 was proposed in 1999 that would have realigned SR-76 far to the north. This alternative would have had adverse impacts to sensitive habitat from cuts and fill to hillsides and adverse visual impacts and would have required a large number of residential displacements and relocations. During the 1999 environmental study phase, this alternative received substantial agency opposition in the form of comments from the resource agencies (on the NOI/NOP) and public opposition voiced at the Public Scoping Meeting. This alternative was then dropped from further consideration due to the severity of impacts. While the Northern Alternative may have met the 1999 purpose and need and would not adversely impact the San Luis Rey River, it would have adversely impacted both developed and undeveloped areas that include critical, sensitive, and upland habitats.

Letters were sent on May 18, 2006, to request resource agency participation as a Cooperating agency under NEPA, and/or a Participating agency as part of the early agency coordination under Section 6002 of SAFETEA-LU. Letters were also sent to request Responsible agency participation under CEQA on May 21, 1999, and again on October 17, 2005. Letters were sent to the following federal, state, and local agencies:

- Cooperating Agencies: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE); U.S. Fish and Wildlife (USFWS), U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).
- Participating Agencies: ACOE; EPA; USFWS, Pala Band of Mission Indians; La Jolla Band of Luiseño Indians; Pauma Band of Mission Indians; San Luis Rey Band of Mission Indians; Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians; Rincon Band of Liuseño Indians; the Soboba Band of Mission Indians; California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG); California Highway Patrol (CHP); California Environmental Protection Agency; California Air Resources Board; State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO); California Resources Agency; San Diego County Air Pollution Control District; County of San Diego; San Diego County Water Authority; San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board (RWQCB); SANDAG; NCTD; North County Fire Protection District; San Diego Gas and Electric; North County Fire Protection District; Rainbow Municipal Water District; and the City of Oceanside.
- Responsible Agencies: CDFG, California Transportation Commission (CTC), City of Oceanside, California Water Resources Control Board Region 9, and the County of San Diego.

In response to the letters, the ACOE agreed to be a Cooperating agency under NEPA. The EPA agreed to be both a Cooperating and Participating agency. The USFWS, CDFG, RWQCB, County of San Diego, San Diego County Water Authority, North County Fire Protection District, NCTD, and the CHP agreed to be Participating agencies.

1.4.1 NEPA/404 MOU Integration Process

Because this project would have 5 or more acres of permanent impacts to waters of the U.S. and requires a NEPA Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), the NEPA/404 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) Integration Process applies. In September 2005, Caltrans began coordination with the resource agencies, including the ACOE, USFWS, EPA, and FHWA (along with CDFG and the RWQCB) to implement the NEPA/404 MOU Integration Process for the SR-76 Melrose Drive to South Mission Road Project. NEPA/404 meetings were held bimonthly between September 2005 and December 2006. The proposed project's Purpose and Need, Selection Criteria, and Range of Alternatives were developed and refined during these meetings in order to minimize impacts to biological resources. Caltrans shall continue to work closely with all of the resource agencies to maintain communication and coordination throughout the development of the proposed project.

1.4.2 Net Benefit

Pursuant to the SANDAG 2004 *TransNet* Sales Tax Extension Ordinance, the SR-76 project is to establish the “net benefit” mitigation standard. SR-76 was one of three highway expansions where the *TransNet* Ordinance indicates that “[d]irect and indirect impacts to sensitive plant and animal populations, and to the function of the wildlife corridors, should be mitigated in order to produce an on-site “net benefit” to species and to the movement of wildlife...” Furthermore, the Ordinance states that the net benefit, “will require a comprehensive baseline analysis of existing and future conditions, adoption of measures to mitigate direct and indirect impacts to species, adoption of measures to accommodate species-specific wildlife movement through the corridors, and implementation of capital project designs that can reduce impacts.” No guidance is given to quantify how much mitigation, above that required by existing federal and state regulations, would constitute a net benefit.

Caltrans established an advisory committee to recommend what they believed would constitute a net benefit for SR-76. The group agreed that the overall goal for the San Luis Rey River watershed was to maintain and restore a self-sustaining natural ecosystem. Many biotic and abiotic objectives were discussed to implement this goal including (1) acquisition for increased long-term connectivity, (2) floodplain/riparian restoration, (3) enhanced/new wildlife crossings, (4) water quality improvement activities, and (5) species-specific enhancement. The net benefit mitigation would be that which was above and beyond that required by CEQA/NEPA or for other resource agency permit requirements. The advisory committee suggested that a larger strategy/vision plan for the San Luis Rey River watershed was needed, which put the goal and objectives in context.



Figure 1.1-1
Project Location Map

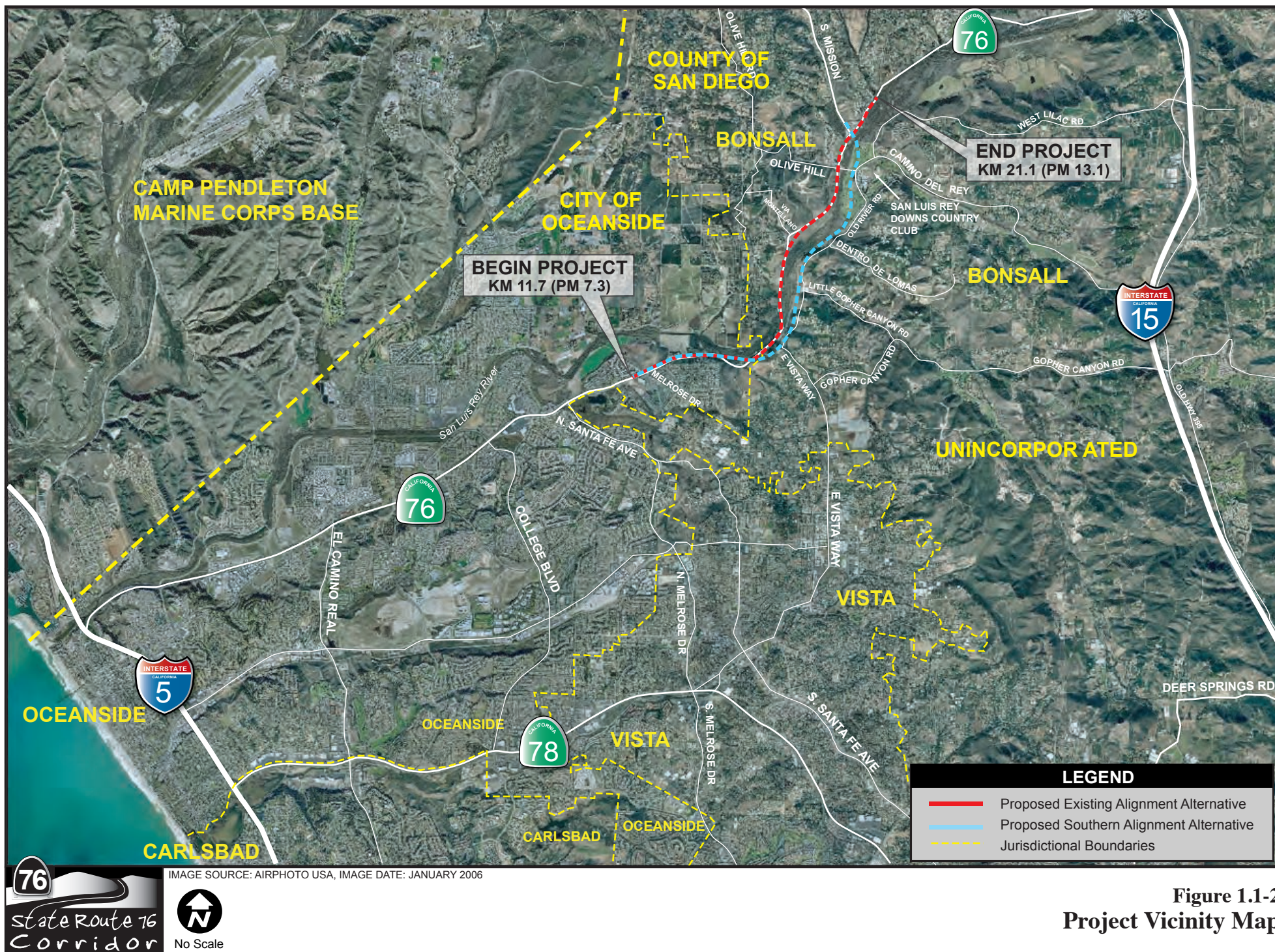


Figure 1.1-2
Project Vicinity Map

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