

I-15/SR 78 Managed Lanes Direct Connectors Project

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



Frequently Asked Questions

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1. What is the Interstate 15 (I-15)/State Route 78 (SR 78) Managed Lanes Direct Connectors project? What is the project proposing to build?

The I-15/SR 78 Managed Lanes Direct Connectors project is proposed by the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), in partnership with the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) and City of San Marcos, and would be constructed within in the cities of Escondido and San Marcos.

This project proposes to build direct connector ramps that will link the existing I-15 Express Lanes – which currently end just south of the I-15/SR 78 interchange in Escondido – and extend them west on SR 78 for approximately three miles in both eastbound and westbound directions. The project would also build a westbound auxiliary lane (a lane that facilitates speed change and merging) between Nordahl Road and Woodland Parkway/Barham Drive, widen and realign Barham Drive, construct a bike facility on Barham Drive and Woodland Parkway, relocate the eastbound SR 78 on-ramp from Barham Drive further to the west, and construct other operational improvements at Woodland Parkway, Barham Drive, and Rancheros Drive.

2. Why is this project needed?

Continued residential and economic growth along the east-west SR 78 corridor in the cities of Escondido and San Marcos has placed strain on its connection to and from I-15, a major north-south managed Express Lanes system in San Diego County.

The I-15/SR 78 Managed Lanes Direct Connectors project would improve connectivity and access to homes and jobs in north inland San Diego County. The project is also expected to reduce the overall amount of time spent driving and vehicle miles travel by inland North County residents, commuters, and businesses, by providing more travel choices.

3. What are Managed Lanes and why build these as opposed to General Purpose Lanes?

Managed Lanes are a tool that help to reduce congestion while still moving more people through a corridor at consistent travel speeds and with more reliable travel times. Managed Lanes are sometimes compared to a “Freeway within a Freeway” and can include a wide variety of strategies such as Carpool Lanes, Transit-Only Lanes, FasTrak Lanes, or a blend of these strategies, as demonstrated on Interstate 15 (I-15). By managing these lanes separately, Caltrans and SANDAG can provide a reliable, faster option to travelers, encourage rideshare and transit use, and enable individuals to make choices that best serve their needs and save travel time. Additionally, when paired with technology, Managed Lanes provide the flexibility to adapt to changing traffic conditions, thereby managing traffic more efficiently in real-time and in the future. A short animated video describing the benefits and a definition of Managed Lanes can be found on the [project website](#) and on [YouTube](#).

4. Is this project still needed considering how COVID-19 has changed the way people live and travel?

While traffic initially decreased by more than 50% in San Diego County because of COVID-19 in early 2020, current traffic levels are only 10-15% lower than last year at this same time. Much of this decrease can be

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attributed to a slower economy and fewer visitors to San Diego. While telecommuting is also more prevalent, other types of trips (such as freight) have risen, which partially offset the benefits of telecommuting. Consequently, we would expect traffic volumes to return and possibly exceed pre-COVID levels in 2021 or 2022.

Additionally, mobility solutions being planned today must look beyond the short and medium-term, but rather decades into the future. San Diego County is still expected to grow, and the regional transportation systems need to be able to accommodate that growth. However, COVID-19 does remind us of the importance of building flexibility and resiliency into our transportation solutions. The demand for transportation has many external influences – such as technology, economic growth, and land use patterns – that are difficult to accurately predict. Strategies such as Managed Lanes provide new tools to address these external changes in a flexible manner that can be adjusted over time to move more people through a corridor faster, fairer, and cleaner.

5. Are there any bicycle and pedestrian improvements included in this project?

The I-15/SR 78 Managed Lanes Direct Connectors project includes the construction of a new bike facility along Barham Drive as well as bike and pedestrian undercrossing improvements at Woodland Parkway/Barham Drive. This bike path is expected to connect CSU San Marcos and the CSU San Marcos SPRINTER light rail station with the Inland Rail Trail, a proposed 21-mile Class I bikeway that connects Oceanside with Escondido along the SPRINTER Rail Line. More than half of the Inland Rail Trail is completed or under construction. The bike facility component of I-15/SR 78 Managed Lanes Direct Connectors project supports a vision for a larger, interconnected, and multimodal transportation network that increases connectivity between employment hubs, educational institutions, and residential neighborhoods.

6. Where are we in the development process of the I-15/SR 78 Managed Lanes Direct Connectors project? What is the next step?

The development lifecycle of any regional transportation project consists of four phases:

- 1.) Conceptual planning
- 2.) Environmental review
- 3.) Design
- 4.) Construction

The project planning process was completed in 2017. The project is currently in the early stages of environmental review, which is expected to be complete in mid-2023. The design phase is funded and anticipated for 2024. Construction is anticipated to begin in 2025 and be complete by 2028, pending funding. After construction is complete, the improvements will be managed by Caltrans maintenance and operations teams.

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7. What is the process and timeline for the project's environmental review?

As required by the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), the project Notice of Preparation (NOP) was filed on Monday, October 19, 2020. The NOP advised the public that the environmental review process had begun and invited the public to provide initial comments on the project and potential environmental impacts to study. A 30-day public scoping period was held between October 19 and November 20, 2020 and a virtual public scoping meeting was hosted on October 29, 2020.

Caltrans, as the lead agency under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), is currently evaluating over 90 public comments received during the 30-day public scoping period. Key themes heard across the public feedback included general impacts on traffic, traffic patterns on I-15 near the Valley Parkway on- and off-ramps, Managed Lanes operations and pricing, noise, landscaping, air quality, and proposed bike and pedestrian facilities. The project team is taking the public comment into consideration as they begin to evaluate project alternatives and conduct technical studies to be summarized and released for public review in the project's Draft Environmental Impact Report/Environmental Assessment (EIR/EA).

The project team anticipates releasing the Draft EIR/EA in mid-2022, at which point a public hearing and additional public comment period will be held to gather specific input on the project alternatives. The Final EIR/EA is anticipated for release in mid-2023. A visual process and timeline exhibit for the project environmental process can be viewed on the project [website](#).

8. How can I still provide feedback on the project?

While the official public scoping comment period has closed, the project team welcomes questions and comments throughout the environmental review phase. The project team is always interested in identifying opportunities to improve the project and ensure all community comments and concerns are considered. The project team can be reached in several ways:

- **Online:** KeepSanDiegoMoving.com/SR78
- **Email:** SR78@KeepSanDiegoMoving.com
- **Phone:** [\(888\) 547-1161](tel:(888)547-1161)
- **Social Media**
 - Instagram: [@SDCaltrans](https://www.instagram.com/SDCaltrans) | [@SANDAGregion](https://www.instagram.com/SANDAGregion)
 - Twitter: [@SDCaltrans](https://twitter.com/SDCaltrans) | [@SANDAG](https://twitter.com/SANDAG)
 - Facebook: [@CaltransDistrict11](https://www.facebook.com/CaltransDistrict11) | [@SANDAGregion](https://www.facebook.com/SANDAGregion)

Additionally, another opportunity for official public comments will be provided in mid-2022 in conjunction with the release of the Draft EIR/EA. In order to receive notification of upcoming public input milestones, please visit KeepSanDiegoMoving.com/SR78 and [sign up](#) for e-updates.

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9. Why not focus on transit first?

The I-15/SR 78 Managed Lanes Direct Connectors is a key component of the larger SANDAG Regional Plan vision for a Managed Lanes system that would connect all corners of San Diego County and extend interregional transit service. For example, the I-15/SR 78 Managed Lanes Direct Connectors project could immediately support the potential extension of *Rapid* transit service from the I-15 Express Lanes, through the interchange and to major economic hubs and potential future mobility hubs along the SR 78 corridor.

The project is also an integral component to the holistic [North County Comprehensive Multimodal Corridor Plan \(CMCP\)](#) that is concurrently being studied. [CMCP's](#) are data-driven plans to reduce congestion and generate transportation choices while preserving community character and creating opportunities for enhancement projects. North County transportation facilities included in the study are the SPRINTER light rail between the Oceanside and Escondido transit centers, major local arterials like Palomar Airport Road that connect community developments and job centers to major transportation facilities, State Route 78 between I-5 and I-15, western portions of State Route 76, and the Inland Rail Trail bike path between Oceanside and Escondido.

The North County CMCP will make recommendations to integrate Managed Lanes facilities, transit services, active transportation, operational improvements, and technology to better manage traffic demand and increase future travel choices throughout the North County CMCP planning area.

10. How does the project fit into SANDAG's Regional Plan vision and 5 Big Moves?

This project and the North County CMCP support the overarching SANDAG Regional Transportation Plan [5 Big Moves](#) vision to integrate transportation facilities and technology, maximize flexible solutions to move through and around corridors, create travel choices competitive to driving alone, and connect people to where they live and work both locally and regionally. In particular, the CMCPs are the implementation blueprints that take the transportation vision of the [2021 Regional Plan](#) and explore the programs and projects that can be developed to make it a reality.

11. Why does the project propose only three miles of Managed Lanes on SR 78? Why not extend these Managed Lanes all the way to I-5?

Early planning-level traffic studies and travel pattern data indicate that the east end of the SR 78 corridor produces the majority of traffic congestion and over 50% of westbound traffic from the I-15/SR 78 interchange exit within the first three exits along westbound SR 78. The proposed three miles is the optimal length to improve operations and travel time reliability quickly and efficiently.

Additionally, a separate project to extend the Managed Lanes on SR 78 an additional 11 miles west (San Marcos Boulevard to El Camino Real) has been funded for environmental review and is anticipated to begin in early 2021. The scope, need, and purpose of such a large project will vary considerably in size, cost, and time. Both of these projects are included in the North County CMCP study.

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12. What about improving the I-5/SR 78 interchange?

The I-5/SR 78 interchange project has been allocated funding to begin the environmental review process. This funding is currently programmed for fiscal year 2023. Caltrans and SANDAG are looking into additional opportunities to secure the necessary additional funding. Per the SANDAG's current Regional Transportation Plan, the project is scheduled to be constructed in 2040.

13. Will any sound walls be constructed as part of this project?

The proposed project's noise impacts will be studied through the environmental review process to determine if and where sound walls would be appropriate. A Noise Study will be conducted during the environmental process, followed by the development of a Noise Abatement Decision Report (NADR). Federal regulations guide Caltrans' process to determine the state protocol of whether a sound wall is both feasible and reasonable for construction and will achieve a 5-decibel noise reduction after construction is completed. These policies are outlined in the [Caltrans Traffic Noise Analysis Protocol](#), which was approved by the Federal Highway Administration and is based on the [Highway Traffic Noise Analysis and Abatement Policy and Guidance](#). There are several factors that are taken into consideration when reviewing proposed sound walls – the date in which property was built, projected future noise levels, feasibility of construction on a topographical location, ability to achieve a 5-decibel reduction, and cost per residence allowance. The NADR will study all these factors and make noise abatement decision recommendations.

14. Will this project improve the on- and off-ramps near Valley Parkway on I-15?

Traffic flow on I-15, just south of the SR 78 interchange, is expected to improve with the construction of Managed Lanes Direct Connectors between the I-15 Express Lanes and SR 78. The Managed Lanes Direct Connectors intend to eliminate some of the weaving and bottlenecks that currently occur on both freeways, as a result of vehicles trying to enter or exit the I-15 Express Lanes. However, as part of the development of the Draft EIR/EA, the project team will study overall traffic operations near the Valley Parkway on- and off-ramps to I-15, and look for opportunities to improve traffic flow between north-south through traffic on I-15 and traffic entering and exiting I-15 at Valley Parkway.

15. Why does the Barham Drive on-ramp to eastbound SR 78 need to be relocated?

The outside of the freeway must be widened in order to accommodate a new Managed Lane in each direction on SR 78. Due to this widening, the Barham Drive on-ramp to eastbound SR 78 will not fit in the current location in a way that meets design standards. Additionally, relocating the Barham Drive on-ramp further to the west will provide a longer distance to merge onto eastbound SR 78 and improve overall traffic operations.

Continued residential and economic growth near Barham Drive, west of Woodland Parkway, is expected to increase vehicle traffic using the on-ramp. The new eastbound on-ramp will be constructed alongside the realignment of East Barham Road near the eastbound off-ramp to East Barham Drive. The new location will

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conform to design standards, better serve existing and future demand, and improve operations on the freeway.

16. Will this project remove any travel lanes on SR 78?

No, this project will not remove any freeway travel lanes on eastbound or westbound SR 78. The project proposes to build three miles of new lanes – Managed Lanes – one in each direction in the median of SR 78 by widening the inside and outside of the freeway to create space needed to accommodate the additional lanes.

17. Will there be eminent domain as part of this project?

The preliminary project alternatives and common project features will be studied during the environmental review phase. Any potential impact to private property or anticipated property acquisitions will be evaluated and studied as part of this process and presented in the draft environmental document. It is important to note that the project alternatives and proposed common features are conceptual and may change based on public feedback, budget constraints, and the environmental and traffic studies.

18. When will the project be constructed?

Federal, state, and local funding has been secured for the project through the design phase. Design is anticipated by 2024. Construction is anticipated to begin in 2025 and be complete by 2028, pending additional funding.

19. What is the cost of the project?

The projected cost of the project, including planning, environmental, design and anticipated capital and construction support costs is approximately \$450 million.

20. Considering the economic uncertainty resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, how will the construction phase of the proposed project be funded?

Currently, funding has been secured through the design phase of the I-15/SR 78 Managed Lanes Direct Connectors project. Caltrans and its partners will continue to monitor local, state, and federal funding sources and conversations surrounding COVID-19, to best identify opportunities that this project will lend itself as a good candidate for construction funding. Ultimately, construction funding opportunities will be sought through a variety of federal, state, and local funding sources, including *TransNet*, the voter approved half-cent sales tax for regional transportation projects.

21. What kinds of construction impacts should nearby residents expect as part of this project?

Construction is anticipated to begin in 2025 and be complete by 2028, pending additional funding. Prior to construction groundbreaking, outreach will be performed to surrounding residents and businesses in the cities of Escondido and San Marcos as well as to regular commuters along the SR 78 and I-15 corridors. The project team will provide a comprehensive overview on anticipated construction activities and associated

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freeway ramp and lane closure impacts, daytime and overnight work schedules, and a high-level construction timeline for surrounding residents, businesses, and commuters.

Caltrans and SANDAG will work with the construction contractor to ensure that all industry best practices are used to help mitigate construction impacts such as noise, including [Occupational Safety and Health Administration required vehicle back-up alarms](#), throughout the duration of construction.

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