



STATE ROUTE 37 IMPROVEMENT PLAN

Summary of SR 37 Focus Groups

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I. Overview and Recruitment

MIG convened and conducted six focus groups with the purpose of collecting detailed input from area residents who travel the corridor regularly. The feedback received through the focus groups will supplement the input collected through the online survey to provide a deeper understanding of the habits and concerns of SR37 commuters. The focus group recruitment strategy was designed to reach a variety of travelers from each of the four counties and low-income and minority populations. It can be difficult to attract typical members of the public to a community workshop and the focus groups provided an incentive to participate and allowed participants to be screened so we could compose each group to include diverse participants.

Focus group objectives included:

- Gain a better understanding of travel patterns on SR 37 from daily commuters in the four-county area.
- Identify specific locations on the route where travelers have key issues and concerns.
- Identify priority improvements along the route.
- Gain a deeper understanding of the preferences and concerns regarding potential funding strategies to pay for the needed improvements

Recruitment

During January and February 2018 a series of six focus groups were conducted in locations in Marin, Sonoma, Napa and Solano Counties. MIG used two methods to recruit participants: postings on Craigslist and a recruitment flyer that was distributed to community-based organizations, specifically targeting Spanish-speaking residents. Interested applicants were asked to complete a short survey requesting demographic information, contact information, availability and any other qualifying factors. MIG then reviewed the applications, selected a representative group of participants and made screening calls. The criteria for identifying and composing the focus group included:

- Frequent of travel on SR 37
- Ethnically diverse
- Gender balance in the group
- Age diversity
- For focus group # 5: Spanish-speaker
- For focus group # 6: low-income community member

Focus group participants received a \$60 stipend for their participation. Twelve participants were recruited for each group so that we would have ten participants. The over-recruitment helped address no-shows and late comers.

Format

All six focus groups were 90 minutes in length and had up to 12 participants. One focus group was organized in each County and two additional focus groups were organized to insure participation of low-income residents and Spanish-speaking residents. The focus group conducted in Spanish was held in in Sonoma, and the focus group including low-income residents was held in Vallejo.

The focus groups followed the same format and mirrored the questions that were asked in the on-line survey which was conducted from mid December 2017 to mid-January 2018. More than 3,500 people responded. The focus groups allowed us to develop a more in-depth understanding of people’s issues and suggested improvements. A poster-board with a map of the corridor was displayed at the front of the room to help participants provide location-specific input. The focus groups were designed to follow a conversational format and the focus group protocol was intended to help guide the focus groups through the discussion. Participants were given a brief introduction to the purpose and goals of the focus group before being asked to present themselves, indicating how they usually travel on SR 37. Participants were then asked a series of discussion questions to collect input on their experiences commuting on SR 37, as well as their ideas on needs and priorities for the corridor. At the end of the session, participants were thanked for their time and provided with information on how to remain involved in the planning process.

Table 1. Focus Group Schedule

County	Date & Time	Location	Number of Participants
Sonoma	Thursday 1/25/2018 6 pm – 7:30 pm	Finnish American Home Association	9
Marin	Monday 1/29/2018 6:30 pm – 8pm	TAM Conference Room	8
Napa	Tuesday 1/30/2018 6 pm – 7:30 pm	Napa County Library	11
Solano (Low-income)	Wednesday 1/31/2018 6 pm – 7:30 pm	Foley Cultural Center	9
Sonoma (Spanish)	Thursday 2/1/2018 6 pm – 7:30 pm	La Luz Bilingual Center	11
Solano	Monday 2/5/2018 6 pm – 5:30 pm	Foley Cultural Center	13

II. Participant Profile

Focus group candidates were asked to complete a brief questionnaire when applying to participate in the focus group. The questionnaire included questions about the candidates’ demographic characteristics, travel habits along SR 37 and employment status. The questionnaire was used to help recruit a diverse group of participants and to ensure each focus group had a mix of participants.

An analysis of the questionnaire revealed the following demographic characteristics of the focus group participants:

- 51% of participants identified as female, and 49% as male
- Participants ranged in age: 10% between 18-24, 43% between 25-44, 35% between 45-54, and 12% 64 and over.

- 46% of participants were White, 29% were Latino, 8% African American, 5% Asian, and the remaining 12 % identified themselves as either Biracial, Native American or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander.
- Participants ranged in income levels: 18% between \$10,000 and 24,999, 34% between \$25,000 and \$49,999, 37% between \$50,000 and \$99,999, and 13% above \$100,000.

A detailed breakdown of the demographics of the focus group participants by focus group is included in tables 2 through 5 below.

Table 2. Participant Profile: Gender

	Marin	Napa	Solano 1 Low Income	Solano 2	Sonoma 1	Sonoma 2 Spanish	Overall
Man	63%	55%	44%	46%	56%	36%	49%
Woman	38%	45%	56%	54%	44%	64%	51%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 3. Participant Profile: Age

	Marin	Napa	Solano 1 Low Income	Solano 2	Sonoma 1	Sonoma 2 Spanish	Overall
0-18	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	18%	3%
18-24	13%	0%	22%	0%	11%	0%	7%
25-34	38%	30%	11%	8%	33%	27%	24%
35-44	0%	40%	22%	0%	11%	36%	19%
45-54	0%	20%	11%	50%	11%	18%	20%
55-64	25%	10%	11%	25%	22%	0%	15%
64 & over	25%	0%	22%	17%	11%	0%	12%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 4. Participant Profile: Race/Ethnicity

	Marin	Napa	Solano 1 Low Income	Solano 2	Sonoma 1	Sonoma 2 Spanish	Overall
African American / Black	0%	10%	11%	25%	0%	0%	8%
American Indian / Native American	0%	0%	11%	0%	0%	0%	2%
Asian	0%	20%	0%	8%	0%	0%	5%
Biracial	0%	10%	22%	0%	11%	0%	7%
Hispanic/Latino	25%	0%	0%	8%	33%	100%	29%
Native Hawaiian / Other Pacific Islander	0%	10%	0%	0%	11%	0%	3%
White (non-Hispanic)	75%	50%	56%	58%	44%	0%	46%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 5. Participant Profile: Income

	Marin	Napa	Solano 1 Low Income	Solano 2	Sonoma 1	Sonoma 2 Spanish	Overall
\$10,000-\$14,999	13%	0%	22%	0%	22%	0%	9%
\$15,000-\$24,999	0%	0%	11%	0%	22%	22%	9%
\$25,000-\$34,999	13%	0%	33%	0%	0%	11%	9%
\$35,000-\$49,998	25%	10%	33%	50%	11%	11%	25%
\$50,000-\$74,999	50%	30%	0%	25%	33%	33%	28%
\$75,000-\$99,999	0%	10%	0%	8%	11%	22%	9%
\$100,000-\$149,999	0%	30%	0%	17%	0%	0%	9%
\$150,000-\$199,999	0%	10%	0%	0%	0%	0%	2%
\$200,000 or more	0%	10%	0%	0%	0%	0%	2%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

III. Key Findings by Theme

General Findings

The following themes were consistent across the six focus groups, and the findings were discussed in each of the six groups. The responses were common across the groups regardless of county of residence, income or language.

Many commuters and frequent users modify their schedules to avoid traffic. Participants with any flexibility in their travel schedules regularly consulted websites and traffic apps to determine the best route and departure time.

- For people with flexible schedules or scheduled appointments (i.e. medical appointment): the ideal travel window is 10am to 2pm.
- Many leave very early for work (around 5am) to avoid traffic.
- Friday afternoon traffic is the worst.

If options are available, many commuters modify their route to avoid traffic.

- Going to Vallejo in the afternoon, some will prefer to take the Richmond bridge; while the route is longer, they prefer to keep moving rather than be stuck in congestion.
- Participants traveling to Sonoma will use Lakeville instead of 121.
- Travelers to Napa sometimes drive up to Petaluma and cut over on 116 to avoid 37: they try to gage traffic right before the exit or use Waze to determine quickest route.
- Some drivers cut through Mare Island to avoid the back-up on 37 as the lanes merge.

Participants, especially those who travel regularly in the evening, considered the corridor to be poorly lit. Bad driver behavior was considered a significant factor influencing safety and traffic conditions on SR 37. Some drivers use shoulders to skip traffic, cutting into lanes at the last minute, driving at high speeds etc.

Areas of Concern Along the Corridor

- Segment A
 - Sears Point back-up is horrible going east-bound in the afternoons due to the lane reduction. Most participants highlighted this area as a significant bottleneck in their trip.
 - Vallejo-bound drivers compound the problem by cheating and cutting-over from the Sonoma-bound lanes at the last minute.
 - Some drivers make the left turn towards Sonoma and then make a U-Turn to get back onto SR 37 towards Vallejo.
 - Drivers experience poor visibility as you go over the bridge at Blackpoint (over the Petaluma River).
 - Presence of fog increases the safety concerns on Segment A, with low visibility worsening conditions and making the drive quite dangerous.
 - A dip in the road before the Bridge over the Petaluma River going west creates dangerous conditions. It limits visibility, especially as it relates to congestion further up the road. The dip is often filled with water which makes conditions worse.

- The Lakeville intersection slows down traffic on that stretch and can be very dangerous because of people speeding through the corridor.
- Segment B
 - Headlights from oncoming traffic affect visibility at night and create unsafe conditions.
 - Shoulder is too narrow in this section, creating dangerous conditions when there are accidents or cars pulled over.
 - Some participants expressed concerns regarding the ability of emergency vehicles to get through.
 - The lane reduction from two lanes to one lane on both ends creates bottleneck on both ends and results in terrible back-ups.
 - Driver behavior is an issue, people often slow down at the turn (sight-seeing etc.).
- Segment C
 - Drivers experience congestion at Mare Island because of lane reduction to one-lane segment on SR 37.
 - The merge from SR 37 to I-80 is very short and therefore quite dangerous; bad driver behavior during the merges can make it worse.
 - The Sacramento exit in Vallejo has become terribly backed-up in the mornings and there is some driver behavior that makes the intersection dangerous at night.
 - The exit towards Highway 29 is often very back up in the morning which creates unsafe conditions with drivers making last minute decisions about whether to exit or not.

Recommended Improvements

- Throughout the corridor:
 - Better lighting throughout the corridor to improve visibility at night.
 - Wider shoulders, especially in Segment B, to improve safety and have sufficient room to pull-over in case of an emergency.
 - Add carpool lanes to SR 37.
 - Add electronic signs with live traffic conditions.
 - Increase police enforcement along the corridor to discourage bad driver behavior.
 - Improve the striping along the corridor and add reflective markers for people driving at night.
- Segment A:
 - Install a barrier between Sonoma-bound and Vallejo-bound lanes at Sears Point to prevent the cheating.
 - Repair the dip before Petaluma River Bridge going west.
 - Improve Lakeville intersection: extend turn lane and add better warning signs.
- Segment B:
 - Improve the Sears Point intersection: create a flyover or an overpass to remove intersection altogether. The compound effect of the stop light and the lane reduction create terrible congestion during the evening commute.
 - Many participants recommended replacing the stop-light with a flyover which would improve traffic flow through the intersection. This would allow Vallejo-bound and Novato-bound drivers to move through the intersection without stopping at the intersection.

- Widen Segment B to a 4-lane highway.
- Elevate Segment B to avoid future sea-level-rise issues.
- Add baffles between lanes of traffic in Segment B to reduce glare from headlights from oncoming traffic.
- Segment C:
 - Improve Sacramento/Wilson exit to deter drivers from speeding through the exit and the intersection. The exit is dangerous due to people driving at high speeds.
 - Improve the Highway 29 exit to improve safety and encourage better driver behavior.

Public Transit and Bicycling

- Most participants were very favorable to adding transit solutions connecting Vallejo to Novato. Many suggested that this east-west link was vital for the overall regional network.
 - Another benefit mentioned by participants was that transit offers a stress-free and comfortable commute compared to driving in traffic.
- Several participants discussed the possibility of extending the SMART train to Vallejo.
- Several participants suggested providing ferry service between Vallejo and Marin County
- There were additional suggestions to connect with the SMART train in Marin.
- Several participants mentioned that transit would need to have a dedicated lane that allowed it to travel faster than cars, otherwise drivers would be less likely to change how they travel.
- Most participants explained that they would be likely to use public transit only if it was reliable efficient (i.e. quicker than driving).
 - The transit option would have to be faster than driving.
 - Transit would have to bring people close to their work.
 - Travel times would need to be consistent and predictable.
- Several participants explained that any public transit option would have to be well connected to the existing network. Currently, there is a lack of connectivity between different networks at the regional level and this project could contribute to improved connectivity.
- Most participants stated that SR 37 was too dangerous and too lengthy for them to bicycle on and said they would not cycle along the corridor even if facilities were improved. *(Note: participants were selected for the focus groups based on the frequency they drove the corridor. Participants were not asked if they currently traveled by bicycle in other locations.)*

Environmental Concerns

- Participants expressed a general sentiment that improvements to SR 37 should be conducted in a manner that protects the environment.
- Some participants commented that “there was plenty of open land” that could be used for lane widenings.
- Many participants agreed that improvements that reduced congestion would have a positive impact on the environment by reducing emissions and air quality impacts.
- One group proposed a compromise between environmental protection and easing traffic congestion along the corridor: adding carpool lanes to Segment B. This would impact the marshlands by widening the road but would also encourage carpooling.

- Participants recommended elevating the roadway and creating a causeway in Segment B to protect the marshlands.

Funding

- Opinions were split about considering alternative funding options, such as tolling or a sales tax.
 - About half of the participants were favorable to the idea of seeking alternative funding solutions as long as there was proper accountability and the money was used specifically for SR 37.
 - Those in favor of alternative funding believed the benefits outweighed the cost. They mentioned additional benefits such as the fact that tolls can help manage traffic by encouraging commuters to carpool.
 - Those against alternative funding options expressed they believed that Bay Area residents were already paying a lot of taxes and tolls towards transportation improvements. They believed that funding should come from regional and state funding sources. They argued that improvements to SR 37 benefitted the region as a whole and therefore the entire region should pay for the improvements.
- Sales tax:
 - Several participants preferred a sales-tax measure over a tolling option under certain conditions: including a sunset clause in the sales tax measure and ensuring proper accountability for the use of the sales tax revenue.
 - Those that preferred a sales tax measure believed that improving SR 37 would benefit the entire community and therefore the cost should be shared by the entire community, even those that don't use SR 37.
 - Some participants were opposed to a sales tax measure because it would disproportionately impact the poor and because it doesn't collect revenue from tourists.
- Tolling:
 - Several participants expressed concern that people would use shortcuts to avoid the tolls which could create congestion on local roads. The preferred location for a toll was near Mare Island. Several participants though Segment C should not be tolled because it is a vital and frequently used road for Vallejo and Napa residents.
 - Participants that were in favor of tolling explained that they would not mind paying a toll if SR 37 were significantly improved, including both widening to 4 lanes and elevating segment B. They explained that they were ready to pay if it would mean that their commute was shorter.
 - Several participants were against tolling because they thought tolls would continue to rise and become a big financial burden on those who commute daily, especially those who would have to pay two tolls.
 - Several participants referenced the HOT lanes that exist on other highways in the Bay Area: some liked the idea and thought it could be applied to the SR 37 corridor, while other were opposed to such pricing methods.

IV. County-Specific Findings

This section emphasizes findings that were specific to the focus groups in the specific county. Participants responses were based on where they lived, worked and traveled to most frequently.

Napa

- Most participants were daily users of SR 37, commuting towards Marin or San Francisco. Many adjust their route or travel times depending in traffic.
- There was a discussion about the rural nature of the North Bay and the fact that it would be unfair to toll SR 37 users because they have no other option than to drive their car or truck
- Several participants requested improving the escape routes from Napa County. They mentioned that during the fires there was only one way out and that was very dangerous.
- Participants had split opinions on tolling, many were in favor if it helps improve conditions. However, most were against tolling segment C because it is a vital connector for many Vallejo and American Canyon residents.
- Many were in favor of adding public transit options, especially extending SMART to Napa and expanding ferry service from Vallejo.

Vallejo

The findings from the two focus groups held in Vallejo are summarized jointly below. Although one of the Vallejo focus groups targeted low-income individuals, there were no significant differences in the input received through each of the focus groups.

- Two focus groups were conducted in Vallejo, one included County residents and the second focused on including low-income residents who provided detailed feedback about Segment C. Many participants provided details of their experiences with dangerous conditions and bad driver behavior at the Sacramento exit and Wilson Avenue.
- Participants frequently commented on unnecessary slow-downs caused by people sight-seeing along Segment C of 37.
- Participants described night time conditions along segment B as dangerous because of poor lighting and no shoulder.
- Several participants expressed that daily commuters should receive a discount if a toll is implemented on SR 37.
- Participants described Vallejo as being poorly connected to the rest of the region's public transit network. Several participants expressed a desire to see BART extended to Vallejo as well as an east-west connection between Novato and Vallejo.
- Some participants favor a sales tax as long as proper accountability is put in place and that it includes a sunset clause.
- Other participants prefer a toll because a sales tax disproportionately impacts the poor and because a sales tax isn't fair to those that don't use SR 37. They also like the fact that a toll applies to tourists as well.

Sonoma

- Strongly advocated for a barrier between Sonoma-bound and Vallejo-bound lanes at Sears Point going East.
- Warned of people taking alternate routes if SR 37 were tolled between Novato and Sears Point. Recommended placing a toll at Mare Island.
- Many people going to Sonoma use Lakeville to avoid the Sears Point back-up.
- Mentioned importance of offering an east-west public transit option that connects to the Capitol Corridor.
- In favor of adding a carpool lane to SR 37 (referenced success of new carpool lane on 101 near Santa Rosa).

Sonoma Spanish:

- Several participants expressed a strong lack of trust of FastTrak and would like to see more accountability and transparency about the use of the funds collected through FastTrak.
- Strong preference for extending SMART train rather than adding ferry service because a ferry wouldn't serve Sonoma residents. Participants complained about the lack of integration between the different transit systems in the Bay Area.
- Slight preference for a sales tax over a toll, but some would accept a toll if it meant better travel conditions along the route.

Marin

- Most participants had travel destinations and flexible travel times so they could plan their trips on SR 37 to avoid congestion.
- Many participants travel to Sonoma and can choose between 101 or SR 37 depending on traffic conditions.
- Many were concerned with ground level fog and the dangerous conditions it creates.
- Participants were concerned about poor driver behavior along the route and related safety impacts.
- Were in favor of additional ferry service. A ferry line from Novato (Blackpoint) to San Francisco was proposed.
- Expressed a slight preference for tolling rather than sales tax.

V. Next Steps

The Project Team will use the focus group findings to inform the development of the SR 37 Corridor Improvement Plan. Community input is a vital part of the plan development and the SR 37 Outreach Team will continue to share information and engage with the public as needed throughout the planning process.