



# STATE ROUTE 37 IMPROVEMENT PLAN

## Summary of SR 37 Focus Groups Potential Conceptual Alternatives

Prepared by:



Moore Iacofano Goltsman, Inc.  
800 Hearst Avenue  
Berkeley, CA 94710

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# I. Executive Summary

## Overview

With direction from the SR 37 Project Team, MIG, Inc. conducted five focus groups to collect input from nearby residents and regular commuters on potential approaches for improving State Route (SR) 37. The focus group recruitment aimed to convene diverse and representative groups of residents from the four counties that border SR 37, including the counties of Marin, Napa, Solano, and Sonoma. Stipends incentivized members of the public to apply for and attend the focus groups, attracting commuters who might not otherwise participate by screening applicants for relevant travel patterns.

The feedback collected from the five focus groups will inform ongoing efforts to improve SR 37 and ensure that future improvements reflect the interests and priorities of local residents and commuters.

Focus group objectives included:

- Gain a better understanding of travel priorities and preferences regarding the six conceptual alternatives from daily commuters in the four-county area
- Identify conceptual alternatives and topics that require additional study
- Identify the advantages, benefits, and disadvantages for each of the six conceptual alternatives, from the perspective of nearby residents and regular commuters
- Identify concerns and questions for each of the six conceptual alternatives
- Identify and rank criteria for evaluating and selecting potential SR 37 improvements
- Gain a deeper understanding of the preferences and concerns regarding resident and commuter travel needs and preferences

## Key Themes and Takeaways

This section highlights the key takeaways from the discussion about each of the six alternatives presented to the focus group participants. Below is an overview of the main preferences and concerns expressed by participants in all five focus groups.

**Alternative 1** – All five focus groups viewed Alternative 1 as a good interim solution, which should be implemented immediately while waiting for a long-term solution to be completed. Participants liked that conditions could improve within a reasonable timeframe if this approach were implemented. Many participants recommended combining the idea of a moveable barrier with one of the other alternatives to further increase capacity.

**Alternatives 2 & 3** – The focus groups had difficulty distinguishing between Alternatives 2 and 3. Participants who preferred Alternative 2 frequently did so because they perceived it to be less expensive than Alternative 3. Other participants preferred Alternative 3 over Alternative 2 because they thought it might be less harmful to the environment.

**Alternative 4** – Most focus groups were adamant in their dislike for Alternative 4, with the exception of the Spanish-language focus group where nearly half the participants thought such a route would benefit them. Most participants disliked that the proposal would take most commuters out-of-their-way and increase their mileage and transportation costs.

**Alternative 5** – Alternative 5 polarized participants more than the other proposals. Some participants were enthusiastic about the alternative’s potential to increase route options and provide direct routes between destinations. The remaining participants thought that the proposal would be too expensive and would negatively impact the bay’s natural beauty and natural environment.

**Alternative 6** – Every group recognized the need for expanding regional public transit systems but most participants believed this alternative to be less of a priority than adding capacity to the roadway. Vallejo participants disliked Alternative 6 because it would not provide service to Vallejo. All five focus groups recommended increasing public transit options concurrently with any improvements to SR 37, and expressed the need for connections to and from train stations.

The following summarizes general themes that emerged from the focus groups that do not relate specifically to any of the alternatives but rather illustrate participants’ overall needs and concerns:

- **Immediate relief:** Focus group participants expressed their desire for immediate relief with regards to traffic and congestion. They viewed the 20-year timeline to implement most of the Alternatives as unacceptable.
- **Need for greater long-term capacity:** The focus groups were adamant that four lanes would be insufficient to accommodate future population growth in the area. Many participants urged for either 6 lanes or 5-lanes with a zipper.
- **Concern for the environment and ecosystem:** All five focus groups expressed concern for the environmental impact of such a project.
- **No tolls:** All five focus groups expressed their concern over toll roads. Participants said that new tolls in addition to existing bridge tolls would make commuting across the region unaffordable.

## II. Focus Group Recruitment and Format

### Recruitment

MIG, Inc. conducted five focus groups between May 2018 and June 2018 in the counties of Marin, Napa, Solano and Sonoma. To recruit diverse and representative groups of residents, the project team posted ads on Craigslist that invited potential participants to apply by completing a brief online survey via Survey Monkey. The online survey requested information regarding travel patterns, demographic information, contact information, and availability, thereby allowing the project team to review applicants and make screening calls to select diverse groups of residents.

For the fifth focus group, the project team targeted Spanish-speaking residents of Sonoma County by partnering with two local community-based organizations that serve Latino communities in Sonoma County. The La Luz Bilingual Center and Latino Service Providers assisted the project team in spreading the word about the focus group through their local networks.

The criteria for identifying and recruiting focus group participants included:

- Frequency of travel along SR 37
- Ethnic and racial diversity
- Gender balance
- Income and age diversity
- For focus group #5: Spanish-speakers

Focus group participants received a \$100 stipend for their participation. Fifteen participants were recruited for each group to ensure a minimum of ten participants. This over-recruitment compensated for no-shows and latecomers.

### Format

All five focus groups were 120 minutes in length and had up to 15 participants. One focus group was organized in each of the four counties and one additional focus group was organized to ensure the participation of Spanish-speaking residents. The focus group conducted in Spanish was held in Sonoma.

The focus groups utilized the same format to collect comparable input from each of the five groups. Before starting the discussion, the facilitator presented a 10-minute overview of the project to create a shared understanding of the road's current conditions, the project's goals and objectives, and the principal features of each of the six alternatives. The facilitator minimized the response to questions at this point in the focus group to maximize the discussion time and reduce any bias that might be introduced by information provided through a detailed Q&A. Prior to the presentation, the facilitator asked a few "warm-up" questions to set a friendly tone and help people feel more comfortable.

A conversational format and list of questions helped guide the group through a detailed discussion about each alternative. Poster boards illustrating each of the six alternatives were displayed at the front of the room to help participants focus on each alternative in turn. The discussion walked through each of the alternatives individually, asking participants to explain what they believe are the advantages and

disadvantages of each alternative. Participants received comment cards to write down additional comments and rank the six alternatives according to their needs and preferences.

**Table 1. Focus Group Schedule**

<b>County</b>	<b>Date &amp; Time</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Vallejo	Thursday 5/24/2018 6 pm – 8 pm	Vallejo Community Center	10
Sonoma	Wednesday 5/30/2018 6 pm – 8pm	Sonoma Community Center	13
Napa	Monday 6/4/2018 6 pm – 8 pm	Napa County Library	12
Sonoma (Spanish)	Tuesday 6/12/18 6 pm – 8 pm	La Luz Bilingual Center	14
Marin	Wednesday 6/13/2018 6 pm – 8 pm	The Transportation Agency of Marin	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:

- 52% of participants identified as male, and 48% as female.
- Participants ranged in age: 5% between 18-24, 41% between 25-44, 31% between 45-54, and 23% 55 and over.
- 47% of participants were White, 29% were Latino, 6% African American, 5% Asian, and the remaining 13% identified themselves as either Biracial, Native American or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander.
- Participants ranged in income levels: 7% between \$10,000 and 24,999, 28% between \$25,000 and \$49,999, 46% between \$50,000 and \$99,999, and 19% 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	Sonoma 1	Sonoma 2 Spanish	Vallejo	Overall
<b>Man</b>	46%	50%	46%	57%	60%	52%
<b>Woman</b>	54%	50%	54%	43%	40%	48%
<b>Total</b>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

**Table 3. Participant Profile: Age**

	Marin	Napa	Sonoma 1	Sonoma 2 Spanish	Vallejo	Overall
<b>18-24</b>	0%	0%	8%	14%	0%	5%
<b>25-34</b>	23%	25%	15%	7%	20%	18%
<b>35-44</b>	23%	8%	23%	29%	30%	23%
<b>45-54</b>	15%	42%	23%	36%	40%	31%
<b>55-64</b>	15%	8%	23%	7%	10%	13%
<b>64 &amp; over</b>	23%	8%	8%	7%	0%	10%
<b>Total</b>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

**Table 4. Participant Profile: Race/Ethnicity**

	Marin	Napa	Sonoma 1	Sonoma 2 Spanish	Vallejo	Overall
<b>African American / Black</b>	0%	0%	15%	0%	20%	6%
<b>American Indian / Native American</b>	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
<b>Asian</b>	23%	0%	0%	0%	0%	5%
<b>Biracial and Multiracial</b>	8%	17%	15%	0%	20%	11%
<b>Hispanic/Latino</b>	0%	8%	8%	100%	20%	29%
<b>Native Hawaiian / Other Pacific Islander</b>	0%	8%	0%	0%	0%	2%
<b>White (non-Hispanic)</b>	69%	67%	62%	0%	40%	47%
<b>Total</b>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

**Table 5. Participant Profile: Income**

	Marin	Napa	Sonoma 1	Sonoma 2 Spanish	Vallejo	Overall
<b>Less than \$10,000</b>	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
<b>\$10,000-\$14,999</b>	0%	0%	8%	0%	0%	2%
<b>\$15,000-\$24,999</b>	0%	8%	0%	20%	0%	5%
<b>\$25,000-34,999</b>	0%	0%	8%	20%	20%	9%
<b>\$35,000-\$49,998</b>	8%	17%	15%	40%	20%	19%
<b>\$50,000-\$74,999</b>	31%	25%	23%	0%	30%	22%
<b>\$75,000-\$99,999</b>	23%	33%	31%	20%	10%	24%
<b>\$100,000-\$149,999</b>	8%	0%	15%	0%	10%	7%
<b>\$150,000-\$199,999</b>	8%	8%	0%	0%	10%	5%
<b>\$200,000 or more</b>	23%	8%	0%	0%	0%	7%
<b>Total</b>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

### III. Focus Group Findings

#### General Findings

The general findings presented below reflect the general needs and preferences expressed by focus group participants. These findings emerged from the conversations during the focus groups but do not relate to any particular alternative.

- **Immediate relief** – Focus group participants expressed their need for immediate relief with regards to traffic and congestion. Several focus groups, and the Marin one in particular, suggested a multi-pronged approach that simultaneously pursues an interim or immediate solution, new public transit, and a more comprehensive, long-term solution.
- **Four lanes would be insufficient long-term** – The focus groups were adamant that four lanes would be inadequate to accommodate future population growth.
- **No tolls** – All five focus groups expressed their concern over toll roads. Participants said that new tolls in addition to existing bridge tolls would make commuting across the region unaffordable.
- **Concern over cost** – Several participants, especially in the Marin focus group, cited concerns over the cost of the different alternatives.
- **Concern for the environment and ecosystem** – Many participants were concerned about potential impacts on marshlands and farmlands located along SR 37.
- **Debating the usefulness of carpool lanes** – Many participants thought carpool lanes would not help relieve traffic unless there were at least 6 lanes. In the Vallejo focus group, most participants opposed carpool lanes, stating that too few cars utilize these lanes.
- **Little demand for bike lanes** – While several participants bike recreationally, many felt that it would be difficult to use SR 37 as a bike route even if improvements were made.

#### Findings by Alternative

The focus group findings are summarized below and sorted by alternative. Location-specific findings are identified with their corresponding region. Findings that were consistent across all five focus groups do not reference any specific location.

##### Alternative 1: 3-Lane Contraflow

Participants liked Alternative 1 because it would use the existing roadway and therefore be more cost-effective. Most participants believed that this alternative would be a good interim solution while a more long-term solution is underway. Participants noted that this alternative does not address sea-level rise.

- **Immediate impact:** The short-term timeline for implementation appealed to participants.
- **An interim solution:** The focus groups viewed this alternative as a “band-aid” that would improve traffic in the short-run but would not improve traffic in the long-term due to future population growth. All five focus groups suggested implementing Alternative 1 while simultaneously pursuing a second, long-term solution. Participants stated that commuters could not wait for 20 years for a more effective solution to be completed.

- **Cost effective:** Many participants like this alternative because it uses the existing roadway and therefore would be more affordable.
- **Vulnerable to sea-level rise:** The focus group participants noted that Alternative 1 does not address the project's goals with respect to sea-level rise.

#### *Marin*

- **Concern over safety and feasibility:** Participants in the Marin focus group noted that SR 37 has several safety issues that impact the feasibility of Alternative 1. For example, some participants stated that they did not believe SR 37 is wide enough and has enough visibility to construct a contraflow lane.

#### *Napa*

- **Concern over potential shoulder removal:** Several participants were concerned that this alternative would remove the shoulder on SR 37 and therefore create more congestion in the event of accidents.

#### *Sonoma 1*

- **Concern over marshlands and farmlands:** The Sonoma focus group was concerned about potential impacts on marshlands and farmlands located along SR 37.

#### *Sonoma 2 (Spanish)*

- **Concern over confusion regarding contraflow:** Many participants were concerned that the contraflow would create traffic because people confuse the contraflow mechanisms for construction and they slow down as a result. They explained that this has been a problem on the Golden Gate Bridge.

### Alternative 2: 4-Lane Highway

Participants liked that Alternative 2 would add additional lanes and protect the road from sea level rise.

- **Similar to Alternative 3** – Many participants asked for clarification on the difference between Alternatives 2 and 3, specifically in terms of cost, construction time and environmental impacts.
- **Too few lanes for long-term population growth** – Many participants recommended adding lanes to this alternative believing that 4 lanes were insufficient considering long-term population growth in the region.
- **Perceived timeliness and cost effectiveness** – Participants who preferred Alternative 2 over 3 did so because they thought it would be more cost-effective and quicker to build.

#### *Sonoma 1*

- **Concern over potential harm to the environment and eco-system**
- **Concern over drivers' ability to contact emergency services** – The Sonoma focus group was concerned over drivers' ability to pull over safely and to contact emergency services, as is sometimes the case along bridges.

### Alternative 3: 4-Lane Causeway

Participants had difficulty distinguishing between Alternative 2 and Alternative 3. Many participants assumed that the causeway would have less of an environmental impact, which contributed to their preference for Alternative 3 over Alternative 2.

- **Similar to Alternative 2** – Many participants asked for clarification on the difference between Alternatives 2 and 3, specifically in terms of cost, construction time and environmental impacts.
- **Too few lanes for long-term population growth** – Many participants recommended adding lanes to this alternative believing that 4 lanes were insufficient considering long-term population growth in the region.
- **Preference for Alternative 3 over Alternative 2 because of perceived environmental impacts** – Many participants assumed that the causeway would have less of an environmental impact; as a result, many participants preferred Alternative 3.
- **Concern over seismic safety** – Several participants were concerned about the safety of the causeway in the event of an earthquake.

#### *Sonoma 2 (Spanish)*

- **Concern over bike connections and practicality for cyclists** – Several participants expressed concern for cyclists using the causeway. They believed it would be difficult to bike up to the elevated causeway and they also worried that there would not be connections to other bike paths.

#### *Vallejo*

- **Sturdy and Resilient** – The Vallejo focus group was extremely enthusiastic about causeways. The group viewed causeways as a sturdy and resilient solution to climate change and sea level rise.

### Alternative 4: 4-Lane Highway Near SMART

The focus groups disliked the proposal to create a new, round-about route. Participants disliked the prospect of increased mileage and transportation costs and stated that they would rather sit in traffic. Participants also noted that Alternative 4 would exacerbate existing traffic issues within Napa.

- **Too far out of the way:** The majority of participants disliked Alternative 4. Participants frequently stated that they would rather sit in traffic on SR 37 than drive a significantly longer distance.
- **Increased mileage and transportation costs** – Many participants cited increased mileage and transportation costs as additional reasons for disliking this alternative.
- **Existing traffic issues in Napa** – *Participants were very concerned that the proposed route would exacerbate existing traffic issues in Napa, especially around American Canyon.*

#### *Napa*

- **Potential benefit to Napa wineries** – Several participants mentioned that such an alternative could benefit wineries and the related tourism industry in Napa.

#### *Sonoma 1*

- **Concern over construction timeframe** – Sonoma participants stated that this project would take longer than estimated due to the region's negative track-record with infrastructure projects.

#### *Sonoma 2 (Spanish)*

- **A direct route to Sonoma and Napa** – Several participants in the Spanish-speakers group liked that this alternative would provide a more direct route to Sonoma and Napa. However, they stated that the current highway would have to be maintained for vehicles travelling to Vallejo.
- **Less harmful to the environment** – Several participants preferred this alternative because they believed it would be less harmful to the wetlands and wildlife.

### Alternative 5: 4-Lane Causeway in the Bay

Alternative 5 was extremely polarizing compared to the other five alternatives. While many participants were enthusiastic about the proposal, many were adamantly opposed. Those who supported Alternative 5 liked that the causeway would provide direct routes between a multitude of destinations. These individuals also liked that the causeway has the potential to create multiple connections and routes. Those who opposed Alternative 5 did so because of the proposal's high costs and its impact on the environment and the region's natural beauty.

- **Potential to create multiple routes and options:** Alternative 5 appealed to the focus groups because of the potential to create multiple connections and routes, thereby expanding options.
- **Improved accessibility and connectivity:** The focus groups stated that Alternative 5 has the potential to improve transportation access for areas that currently lack direct routes. They thought a direct connection between I-80 and US-101 would be very beneficial to the region.
- **Too few lanes for long-term population growth** – Many participants recommended adding lanes to this alternative believing that 4 lanes were insufficient considering long-term population growth in the region.
- **Concern over environmental and aesthetic impact** – Participants were concerned over the causeway's impact on marine life, ships, and the bay's natural beauty.
- **Concern over costs and construction timeline** – Several participants believed that Alternative 5 would be too expensive and that construction would take too long.
- **Integrate public transportation** – Participants felt strongly that public transportation systems should be incorporated into this alternative, including buses and possibly a train. Participants also recommended that the bridge should connect directly to transit centers to encourage the use of public transit.

#### Sonoma 2 (Spanish)

- **No direct route from Sonoma to Marin** – Many participants disliked this alternative because it would not serve Sonoma resident travelling home from Marin.
- **Potential to relieve traffic on the Richmond Bridge** – Several participants mentioned that this alternative could help relieve traffic on the Richmond Bridge.

### Alternative 6: SMART Train

Most focus group participants acknowledged the need for additional public transit, however they were unsure how much this Alternative could decrease congestion on its own. Many participants expressed the need for connections from their homes to and from SMART to their workplaces.

- **High cost of SMART**– Many participants explained that the current system is too expensive and they would not be willing to pay more to travel by train unless it was significantly quicker than their commute by car. The Sonoma focus group felt that using the SMART train to connect to other buses and trains is too expensive as it would require paying multiple fares.
- **Concern over "first and last mile" connections:** Participants stated that an extended SMART train wouldn't be a commuting option for many because of the lack of connections from their houses to the stations and from the stations to their workplaces.
- **Need for additional public transportation** – All focus group supported additional public transit infrastructure in the region, but thought it wasn't as much of a priority as expanding SR 37.

- **Preference for BART over SMART** – Several focus groups preferred the BART system over the SMART system because it has more destinations and connections. The Marin and Napa focus groups suggested expanding BART into Solano County and then expanding SMART to connect with BART.
- **Preference for commuting by car** – Some participants explained that they would not consider using a train to commute because they work nights or because they prefer the freedom and flexibility provided by driving.
- **Does not meet transit needs for Vallejo and American Canyon residents** – The proposed SMART train route would not offer connections for Vallejo or American Canyon and therefore doesn't meet the transit needs for these individuals.

#### *Marin*

- **Need for regional public transit** – The Marin focus group emphasized the need for regional public transportation that would connect the Sacramento area with the Greater Bay Area.
- **Valuable only if completed in conjunction with other improvements:** Participants stated that additional public transit connections and other improvements would need to be completed in conjunction with Alternative 6 to make the extended SMART train practical and accessible.

#### *Napa*

- **Potential to boost tourism in Napa** – Several participants thought the SMART train could help boost tourism in Napa.

#### *Sonoma 1*

- **Public transit cannot replace driving** – The Sonoma focus group was adamant that public transportation will never become attractive enough to significantly reduce traffic.

#### *Sonoma 2 (Spanish)*

- **Need to consider commuters that need their car or truck** – Participants explained that this solution would not serve people who work in construction or other industries in which employees need to transport supplies and equipment.
- **Quality of life benefit** – Participants explained that riding the train could improve quality of life by providing a less stressful alternative to driving.

#### *Vallejo*

- **Concern over increased traffic near train stations** – Vallejo participants predicted that the proposed train stations would create new traffic and congestion issues.

## **Alternatives' Rankings**

After the group discussion, participants were asked to rank the different alternatives in order of preference on the handout distributed to them. Table 6 shows the average rank given by the participants for each Alternative. Rank "1" equals participants' most preferred Alternative and "6" represents participants' least preferred Alternative.

Overall, Alternatives 2, 3 and 5 received the highest rankings from focus groups participants, while alternatives 4 and 6 received the lowest rankings from participants. Alternative 3 had the most consistent results, ranking second place in all but one focus group, resulting in it being considered the most preferred alternative overall.

**Table 6. Alternatives' Average Rank**

Table Key

	Most Preferred Alternative
	Second-Most Preferred Alternative
	Least Preferred Alternative

	Marin	Napa	Sonoma 1	Sonoma 2 Spanish	Vallejo	Overall
Alternative 1	2	2.8	3	3.7	3.8	3.0
Alternative 2	3.3	2.3	3.2	2.8	3.8	3.0
Alternative 3	2.9	2.7	2.6	3.1	2	2.8
Alternative 4	4.6	4.3	5.1	3.0	5.3	4.4
Alternative 5	3.9	3.2	2.3	4.3	1	3.0
Alternative 6	4.6	5.8	4.7	4.1	5.3	4.8

### Criteria for Selection

Participants were asked to identify the most important factors that should be considered when deciding which alternative to go forward with. A list of decision-making criteria was established by the facilitator from the responses provided by each group. Then each participant was asked to select the top three most important criteria using three colored stickers: red to identify the most important criteria, yellow for the second-most important and green from the third-most important.

The most commonly identified criteria are bolded in the list provided below. The criteria identified by participants, in order of importance, included:

- **Time to completion: urgency**
- **Effect on traffic congestion**
- **Environmental impacts**
- **Roadway capacity: meets future needs**
- **Safety**
- **Cost of construction**
- Flexibility for future expansion: possibility of phasing project
- Construction impacts
- Accessibility to all users

- Proven solution
- Multiple options
- Cost to commuter
- Maintenance
- Cost benefit ratio
- Funding availability
- No toll

## V. Next Steps

The Project Team will use the focus group findings to further study and develop alternatives to improve SR 37. 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.