

Protecting Animal Crossings On The I-405 Sepulveda Pass Widening Project



At nightfall the stealthy bobcat loped down from the Santa Monica mountain trail past Sepulveda Boulevard, creeping along the top of the dirt embankment under the 405 Freeway.

The bobcat traveled westerly to wander on the other side of the interstate highway which in the early 1960s had divided and cut through the bobcat's natural roaming lands. Within a couple of days the bobcat, tired of its journey, returned, probably the same way it came, to the uplands of Sepulveda Ridge which it favors due to the vegetation and tall grass.

The Metro and Caltrans team building the I-405 Sepulveda Pass Widening Project is designing plans to ensure the bobcat and hundreds of other animals in the wilderness can roam freely

and safely in their natural wild lands of the Santa Monica mountains during and after four years of construction.

"Taking care of our natural resources - the animals, trees and the natural wild lands - is part of our stewardship," said Liz Suh, a California Department of Transportation associate environmental planner.

Suh is part of the project team that will soon start construction of the northbound high occupancy vehicle lane on the San Diego Freeway (I-405) from the Santa Monica Freeway (I-10) to the Ventura Freeway (U.S. 101). The \$1.034 billion project will remove and replace 3 major bridges, widen 13 bridges, spanning over LA City streets, and reconstruct 25 ramps.

"We're working closely with the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, the National Park Service, the Getty Center and other organizations to help keep the animals safe and unrestricted in their travels," said Kristin Fusello, another Caltrans associate environmental planner.

"We are planning an eight-foot high culvert for the bobcat and the coyotes, raccoons, possums and other animals crossing near the Getty (Museum) View Trailhead," remarked Suh, who explained that a projected on-ramp will be built over the wildlife pathway there. The freeway widening project, still in the design phase, has provisions to ensure animals can reach their natural habitats on either side of the new on-ramp.



Near the Getty View Trailhead, which is in the middle of the four-year, 10-mile freeway widening project, crews will alter both the steep slope of the Sepulveda Boulevard Undercrossing and a fence near the freeway to facilitate easy crossing. Other fences near ramps may be modified to guide the wildlife toward the culvert tunnel under the new ramp according to Suh.

In the face of this huge public works assignment, Metro and Caltrans are committed to also minimize construction impact at two other locations where animals cross - Skirball Bridge and Bel Air Crest.

Animals already share Skirball Center Drive Bridge, located a couple of miles north of Getty View Trailhead, with cars and pedestrians, by scurrying along the far side of the span. A perimeter fence will be constructed to funnel the wildlife to the new overpass, which will mark a 10-foot wide travel path on the south side for animal movement. Additionally, a three-foot high concrete wall on the east side will direct the animals to the bridge and keep them from crossing Skirball Center Drive, and more fencing will direct them back and forth from the Sepulveda Trail area.

South of Skirball Bridge at Bel Air Crest Undercrossing the animals run behind the huge freeway pillars. Fencing will be positioned to facilitate animal movement and crews will maintain the slope used by the animals traveling to their natural areas.

In addition to preserving these crossing areas for animal travel, the Metro/Caltrans team is planning "stepping stones", areas where animals can pause from their journey as they navigate their way across the I-405.

"Our plans include planting native vegetation such as trees, shrubs and ground cover in some places along the freeway, that would allow cover for the animals as they journey toward their destination," remarked Suh.

"Our team wants the animals to travel freely and safely around the freeway and we are making plans to comply with all of the environmental requirements and monitor these animal crossings during and after construction, Suh said.

"We're being proactive in our efforts to maintain the native wildlife habitat of our region," said Fusello.



Photos—From left, bob cat east of the I-405, Liz Suh pointing at animal crossing on I-405 map, and gray fox west of the I-405. Photos courtesy of National Park Service and California Department of Transportation.