Memorandum

To: Aaron P. Burton

Senior Environmental Planner

Local Assistance – Environmental Support Department of Transportation, District 8 Date: April 7, 2020

File No: (Riv-Railroad Ave-Local) (Dist. 8 – FPN BRLO-5956[228][229]) Railroad Avenue Bridges Replacement

Project

From: Theresa Dickerson

Supervising Environmental Planner

WSP USA (714) 564-2760

Subject: Scenic Resources Evaluation and Visual Impact Assessment

The purpose of this memorandum is to document the evaluation conducted to assess the visual and aesthetic effects of the Railroad Avenue Bridge Replacement Project (Project) on the existing visual environment. The analysis follows the guidance provided by Caltrans's Standard Environmental Reference Chapter 27 – Visual and Aesthetics Review, as well as the guidance outlined in the publication *Visual Impact Assessment for Highway Projects* published by the Federal Highway Administration in January 2015¹. The analysis considers the site-specific visual context and aesthetic character of the affected area, existing visual and aesthetic resources, visibility of project elements, changes to existing visual resources and to site aesthetics and the sensitivity of identified viewers to determine the extent to which the project may affect the visual environment. The Project is not within an officially designated State Scenic Highway; therefore, a Scenic Resource Evaluation was not conducted. However, the analysis does consider the effects of the Project on scenic and aesthetic resources where they exist within the project corridor.

Caltrans Visual Impact Assessment (VIA) Questionnaire was completed in February 2019 as part of the Preliminary Environmental Study for the project to determine the appropriate level of VIA documentation. The VIA score for the Project was 16. The score was primarily because the Project crosses over the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT), a National Scenic Trail. Based on the VIA Questionnaire scoring metric, an abbreviated VIA is the appropriate level of documentation for the Project (projects scoring between 15 to 19 are considered to have the potential for noticeable visual changes). However, in

¹ https://www.environment.fhwa.dot.gov/env_topics/other_topics/VIA_Guidelines_for_Highway_Projects.aspx#chap53

coordination with Caltrans the final determination was to prepare a technical memorandum as the level of visual change was expected to be negligible.

Project Location

The Project is located on Railroad Avenue in Riverside County between the communities of Whitewater and Cabazon (

Railroad Avenue is an approximately 5-mile stretch of road that runs parallel to Interstate 10 (I-10) and the Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR). It connects the Haugen-Lehmann Way and I-10 at the east end and Main Street and I-10 at the west end. It mostly serves the sparsely populated Cabazon community. The average daily traffic (ADT) volume is approximately 211 vehicles. Periodically, the road carries detoured traffic from the heavily traveled I-10 when the freeway is temporarily closed for construction or emergency incidents. The road also serves as an access route for UPRR and utility maintenance crews. Therefore, it is important to maintain this frontage road in sound condition at all times.

The existing timber bridges carry two lanes (one lane in each direction) of traffic over Fornat and East Channel Stubbe Washes. The timber bridges are approximately 59 feet long and are 32 feet wide from curb-to-curb. The County proposes replacing the existing two 2-lane timber bridges along Railroad Avenue with new 2-lane modern bridges with a curb-to-curb roadway width of 32 feet at the same locations.

The bridges are listed in the federal Eligible Bridge List (EBL) as "Structurally Deficient (SD)" with a low Sufficiency Rating (SR) between 59.1 and 62.9. A sufficiency rating is essentially an overall rating of a bridge's fitness for the duty that it performs. The rating is based on a bridge's structural evaluation, functional/geometric obsolescence, and its essentiality to the public. A low sufficiency rating may be due to structural defects, narrow lanes, low vertical clearance, or any of many possible issues. A bridge is healthy when its SR is more than 80.0. Bridges with SR equal to or less than 80.0 and more than 50.0 require rehabilitation or widening. When the SR falls less than 50.0, bridge replacement shall be considered for public safety. Although the Railroad Avenue bridges carry a status flag of SD with SR ratings between 50 and 80 (qualifying for major rehabilitation), it was determined that the bridges are well beyond their 50-year service life and it would be more cost-efficient to replace the bridges. Additionally, a scour Plan of Action (POA) was performed on the bridges by the County in 2013. The POA recommended total replacement of the bridges as the most cost-effective option due to the extent of the scour, structural instability and deterioration of various timber bridge elements.

Figure 1. Location Map). Railroad Avenue runs parallel to Interstate 10 (I-10). The nearest points of interest to the start of the project corridor include the Desert Hills Premium Outlets, Morongo Casino Resort and Spa, and the Cabazon Dinosaur attraction located approximately 6 miles west of Fornat Wash. The I-10 and State Route 111 interchange lies less than a mile east of the Project, while the Sterling Ruby's Specter Desert X art installation lies approximately 2 miles south west of the Project.

Project Description

The County of Riverside (County), in cooperation with California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), proposes to replace the following two (2) existing scour critical and structurally deficient timber bridges along Railroad Avenue near Whitewater in Riverside County, California:

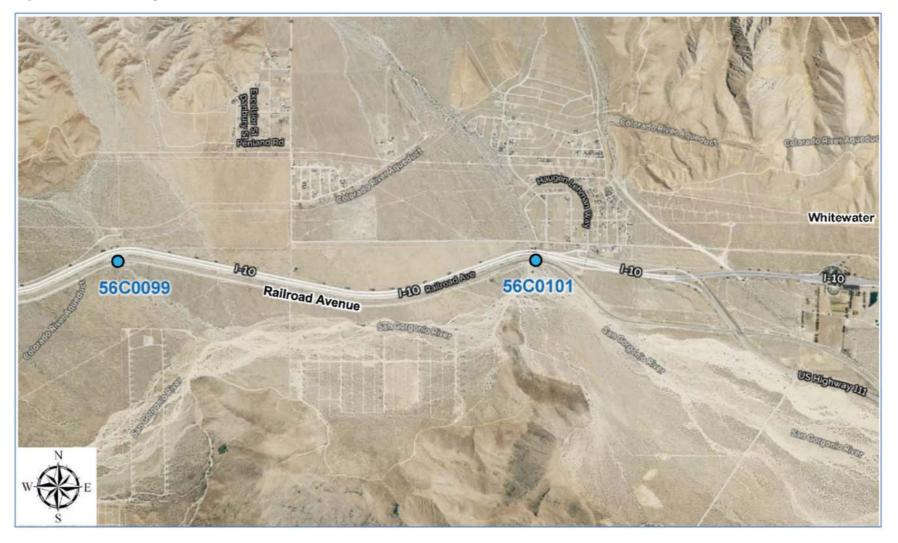
- Railroad Avenue Bridge over Fornat Wash (Br. No. 56C0099)
- Railroad Avenue Bridge over East Channel Stubbe Wash (Br. No. 56C0101)

Railroad Avenue is an approximately 5-mile stretch of road that runs parallel to Interstate 10 (I-10) and the Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR). It connects the Haugen-Lehmann Way and I-10 at the east end and Main Street and I-10 at the west end. It mostly serves the sparsely populated Cabazon community. The average daily traffic (ADT) volume is approximately 211 vehicles. Periodically, the road carries detoured traffic from the heavily traveled I-10 when the freeway is temporarily closed for construction or emergency incidents. The road also serves as an access route for UPRR and utility maintenance crews. Therefore, it is important to maintain this frontage road in sound condition at all times.

The existing timber bridges carry two lanes (one lane in each direction) of traffic over Fornat and East Channel Stubbe Washes. The timber bridges are approximately 59 feet long and are 32 feet wide from curb-to-curb. The County proposes replacing the existing two 2-lane timber bridges along Railroad Avenue with new 2-lane modern bridges with a curb-to-curb roadway width of 32 feet at the same locations.

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Figure 1. Location Map



The proposed project would replace the existing 2-lane timber bridges with new 2-lane modern bridges. The proposed road width would consist of two 12-foot-wide travel lanes, one lane in each direction, and a 4-foot-wide shoulder on each side. Modern traffic barriers/railings meeting current Caltrans safety design standards would be constructed. The proposed bridges would be approximately 60 feet long depending on the channel hydraulic capacity and water surface freeboard requirements. Potentially the elevation of Fornat Wash Bridge may increase, but by no more than two feet to meet freeboard requirements. The East Channel Stubbe Wash Bridge elevation would remain the same. Additionally, approach roadway improvements would be provided and channel improvements would be administered to avoid future scour problems. It is envisioned that the channel bottom will remain earthen.

Existing underground utilities along the north side of Railroad Avenue and suspended utilities (a 4-inch gas line and a telephone line) along the north side of the East Channel Stubbe Wash bridge would be affected by construction and may require relocation.

All construction activities would be conducted within the existing roadway right of way with construction staging and material laydown areas on the roadway itself. Railroad Avenue between the two bridges to be replaced would be closed to continuous traffic during construction. The duration of construction is anticipated to be about 20 months (10 months per bridge). It is envisioned that the two bridges will be constructed one at a time to allow access to UPRR facilities and adjacent utilities from the Haugen-Lehmann Way/I-10 Interchange or the Main Street/I-10 Interchange. A Traffic Management Plan (TMP) would be prepared to address closure of the road and access to local utilities and properties.

The proposed construction would require a temporary construction easement (TCE) from UPRR for access to the channel bottom. However, construction activities are expected to stay at least 50 feet from the live rail tracks to eliminate any effects on railroad operations. The Railroad Avenue bridges abut adjacent State Bridges (Br. No. 56-166 and Br. No. 56-168) that carry I-10 traffic over the same washes. Structural modifications to the State Bridges are not anticipated; however, this will be evaluated during design. An encroachment permit from Caltrans District 8 would be obtained prior to construction.

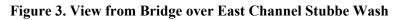
Project Setting

The Project is located in a mountain pass between the San Bernardino and San Jacinto mountain ranges in the northwestern region of Coachella Valley known as the San Gorgonio Pass (Pass) wind farm. The Pass is aptly named for its windy conditions and the thousands of wind turbine installations. The wind turbines dot the landscape in groupings of neat lines, often with a white propeller and white tower, but also occasionally with a white propeller and a metallic tower.

The project corridor is characterized by expansive desert surrounded by the prominent ridgelines of the San Bernardino and San Jacinto mountain ranges (See Figure 2. View from Bridge over Fornat Wash and Figure 3. View from Bridge over East Channel Stubbe Wash).



Figure 2. View from Bridge over Fornat Wash





Across the landscape, the desert is interrupted by broadly reaching, shallow alluvial channels consisting of stony, gravelly loamy and fine sands. As ephemeral streams, the alluvial channels are often dry shallow beds with sparse vegetation. Due to high winds within the project corridor, most vegetation across the landscape are low-lying scrub. The low-lying scrub tends to grow in clusters among the rocky, slightly sloped edges of the alluvial channels. Small trees, such as the honey mesquite and desert willow, are scattered closest to the edges of Railroad Avenue.

Land use within the project corridor is primarily rural open space. The built setting is comprised of transportation infrastructure, including Railroad Avenue, I-10, and the UPRR tracks, and limited rural development including low density residential neighborhoods and more urban development, such as warehouses. From Railroad Avenue, locally recognized and visually prominent natural and built features, such as the San Bernardino and San Jacinto Mountains (background views), San Gorgonia Pass wind farm turbines (background), the UPRR (foreground) and I-10 (foreground) are visible. Views from the bridges extend across the relatively flat desert environment to distant vistas encompassing large vertical features such as utility poles, billboard advertisements, freeway signs, trees and structures, as well as the horizon. Railroad Avenue is classified as a local rural road and has no streetlights or sidewalk improvements.

Views of the bridge structures themselves are limited and can only be seen from the floor of the ditches as they are not elevated and are essentially perpendicular to the I-10 and UPRR bridges. From Railroad Avenue, motorists may recognize the guardrails/barriers and metal warning paddle signs/reflectors along the sides of the bridges as bridge approaches. However, other than these features the bridge structures are not easily identifiable as bridges.

Fornat Wash Bridge is situated approximately 2 feet above the wash floor with timber beams covered with peeling textured stucco. The structure appears to be in fair condition with some deterioration of the original timber stringers from debris flow in the wash (See **Figure 4. View of the Bridge over Fornat Wash from Ditch**).

East Channel Stubbe Wash Bridge is constructed of timber pile piers, concrete, and wood abutment walls. The deck stands approximately 12 feet above the wash floor and is coated with asphalt. The substructure consists of weathered timber beams and log piles. The structure appears to be in fair condition with some splitting of timbers in the center piers (See Figure 5. View of Bridge over East Channel Stubbe Wash from Wash/Segment of the PCT).

The bridges substructure materials and construction style are characteristic of the time at which they were built (circa early 1930's); however, the overall bridge structures have similar forms, elevations, and lines to that of the adjacent railroad and I-10 bridge structures. As seen from the channel washes, the bridges add to the rural character and unique past of the area, but from the roadway itself, the bridges are less notable.



Figure 4. View of the Bridge over Fornat Wash from Ditch



Figure 5. View of Bridge over East Channel Stubbe Wash from Wash/Segment of the PCT

Visual Resources

The Pacific Crest Trail, one of the first federally designated National Scenic trails, crosses under the East Channel Stubbe Wash Bridge within the project corridor. The Pacific Crest Trail is 2,650 miles long and stretches from the Mexican border to British Columbia. The 42-foot long segment of the Pacific Crest Trail that crosses the project corridor was established about 43 years ago (circa 1974); however it is assumed to have achieved historical significance as a part of the larger nationally significant trail, which has a period of significance from 1935 (Pacific Crest Trail System Conference) to 1993 (entire trail officially dedicated). The trail segment within the project corridor is part of an alluvial wash and is essentially just a well-traveled path. There are no specific built features that identify the trail.

Railroad Avenue is not an officially designated State Scenic Highway. The I-10 freeway is eligible for inclusion in the State Scenic Highway System but is not officially designated as a State Scenic Highway. No officially designated scenic vistas have been identified for the Project. However, the following features are notable visual elements within the project corridor:

The San Gorgonio Pass, known for its windy conditions and wind farms, is a unique visual landscape along the I-10 between Beaumont and North Palm Springs with its rows of wind turbines rising above the relatively flat desert floor.

Edging the I-10 are the San Bernardino and San Jacinto mountain ranges that dominate the landscape with their rocky slopes and jagged tops visible for miles from the freeway and surrounding roadways.

Viewers

Viewers within the project corridor consist of travelers on Railroad Avenue, which include utility and UPRR crews working in or traveling through the project corridor, residents, recreationists, and occasionally I-10 traffic, and neighbors (motorists on I-10 and local residents). Viewers are considered to have various levels of sensitivity to visual changes based on their relationship to the project and visual preferences. For example, residents are usually considered to have a high level of sensitivity to visual changes due to their proximity to the changes, duration in which they view the changes (every day) and visual expectations (sense of ownership of views and desire for aesthetically pleasant surroundings). Travelers are considered to have low to moderate sensitivity to visual changes based on the duration in which they can see the changes (speed of travel), familiarity with existing conditions (commuter who sees the same stretch of roadway every day would be more familiar with existing views) and visual preference (expectations for visual order, harmony and coherence). Visual sensitivity is typically expressed as a scale from low to high with the mid-range being moderate-low, moderate and moderate-high.

Residents are considered to have the most familiarity with views within the project corridor and a high sensitivity to visual changes (residential neighborhoods are located north of I-10, which blocks views of the bridges for these viewers). Utility and UPRR crews, as well as recreationists are considered to have some familiarity with views within the corridor and would be expected to have a moderate sensitivity to visual changes. Motorists on Railroad Avenue most likely include residents, utility and UPRR crews, and recreationists and therefore, are considered to have a moderate-high level of sensitivity to visual changes due to their expected familiarity with existing views along the roadway. Motorists on I-10 include a variety of users, including those with some familiarity with views within the corridor and those that may

be experiencing these views infrequently or for the first time. I-10 motorists are expected to have a low sensitivity to visual changes due to the speed in which they are traveling through the corridor (limited time to notice small details) and focus on task at hand (driving).

Project Impacts

The proposed project will remove the existing wooden bridges in their entirety and replace them with modern concrete structures. Work will include improvements to the bridge approaches, upgrades to the existing barriers/railings to meet current Caltrans standards and installation of new bridge footings and riprap within the channel. Riprap is proposed to be installed along the downstream channel slopes and in a portion of the wash bed to address erosion and scour issues. The new bridge structures would be located at the same locations and would have similar horizontal and vertical profiles as the existing bridges. The bridge decks would have a slightly wider profile to accommodate standard lane and shoulder widths (current width is 24 feet 8 inches new width will be 32 feet standard). Fornat Wash Bridge may have a slightly higher profile to meet freeboard requirements, but by no more than two feet. The East Channel Stubbe Wash Bridge elevation would remain the same. It is expected that some vegetation adjacent to the bridges and/or within the channel washes may be removed in the process of demolishing the existing bridges and constructing the proposed improvements where it conflicts with these activities. Post-construction disturbed areas within undeveloped, upland areas would be hydroseeded with native seed mix.

None of the proposed changes would block existing views of the local mountain ranges or wind turbines or affect the quality and vividness of views within the project corridor. The proposed project would replace the existing timber bridges with concrete elements, upgrade the barriers/railings to meet current Caltrans safety design standards and resurface the roadway approaches with new asphalt; however, the roadway would not be realigned and the bridges would maintain a similar height, width and length. The modern materials would be compatible with the materials used on the I-10 and UPRR bridges and would present a consistent and unified look. The linear form and scale of the roadway and bridges would be consistent with what currently exists. The upgrades would not affect the overall setting of a remote desert landscape with limited urban or residential development.

The bridges will be constructed one at a time to allow access through the project corridor for UPRR and utility crews and residents. The Project's Traffic Management Plan will address access and route issues. Construction of each bridge is anticipated to take about 10 months each. During construction, views to and from the roadway would be affected by the presence of large construction equipment, construction crews and materials, and temporary signage redirecting roadway traffic and notifying corridor users of construction activities. Nighttime construction is not anticipated; therefore, night lighting and glare should not be an issue for viewers. The visual effects of construction will be short-term and temporary and are relatively common within most transportation corridors.

For viewers who may need to access the corridor during construction and would be near construction activities or be affected by the bridge closures (recreationists, utility and UPPR crews) their response to the visual changes could be negative primarily as a result of being inconvenienced and changing their expected experience. During more intense construction activities such as bridge demolition or pier installation, the Project segment of the Pacific Crest Trail would be closed to trail users. During these closures, recreationists would be detoured west of the existing trail to an existing underpass at West Channel Stubbe Wash. For recreationists accessing the Pacific Crest Trail during construction, views of Railroad Avenue Bridges Replacement Project

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the bridge structure would be highly altered and the visual experience through this segment of the trail would be reduced. The visual effects of construction would last a maximum of 10 months for each bridge. Once construction is completed this segment of the trail would be restored to its pre-construction condition offering hikers the same quiet respite as they currently enjoy. Since the effects of construction would be temporary and short-term, viewer response is not expected to be significant.

Once construction is completed, the existing 2-lane timber bridges would be replaced with new 2-lane modern bridges. The bridges would appear newer and modern, particularly because the current roadway conditions show aging and weathering from the extreme desert conditions. Immediately following construction, travelers may notice the change due to the contrast between the weathered and aged materials and newer materials and are anticipated to have a moderate reaction. However, over time this reaction is expected to be reduced as the roadway and bridge elements begin to age. Travelers may also notice the vegetation removal, particularly if any large vegetation is removed in proximity to the bridges. However, the limited removal of vegetation is not anticipated to affect the overall character or quality of the desert setting or the roadway corridor. Most of the vegetation is low-lying and therefore not highly visible to most viewers and larger-scale vegetation is already limited in occurrence and therefore not likely to elicit a strong response from viewers if removed. Once the proposed project is completed, upland areas that were disturbed during construction would be hydroseeded with native seed mix.

Because Railroad Avenue is close to I-10, is similar in color to the surrounding environment and is not elevated, it is not highly visible or easily recognized as a roadway to highway users. The UPRR tracks tend to be a more prominent and visually recognized feature because of their elevated ballast base and setback from the freeway. Therefore, the proposed project changes are not expected to result in a negative or positive response from highway users as the changes are not expected to be highly visible or easily recognized as different, particularly over time as the newer materials begin to age and weather. Motorists on Railroad Avenue will notice the newer materials and, immediately following construction, may notice some lack of vegetation. Since these viewers are expected to be more familiar with the project corridor it is expected that this user group would have a moderate response to the changes. The roadway and bridges are not visible from nearby residences; therefore, the proposed changes would not be visible, and residents are not expected to have a response to the proposed changes. Recreationists using the Pacific Crest Trail and adjacent open spaces may recognize the changes as different but are not expected to have a positive or negative response as their focus is generally on the overall experience of the desert setting and rural environment and the proposed changes are not expected to affect this experience. The unique character of the wooden understructures as viewed from the channel washes themselves lends to the rustic and rural character of the sparsely populated desert environment. As viewed from the Pacific Crest Trail, the wood piers and support beams of the East Channel Stubbe Wash bridge are an unusual element of the bridge structure and this segment of the trail. Removing the bridge and the rustic wooden understructure would result in a negative visual impact to those who travel the Pacific Crest Trail. However, as seen in the context of the overall visual experience of an outdoor desert trail, the negative impact would be minor.

Avoidance and Minimization Measures

During construction, the project would implement standard best management practices (BMPs) to address general housekeeping and practices for reducing the visual effects of construction activities to the extent feasible. These include;

- Preserving existing vegetation where feasible,
- Using existing roadway right-of-way for storage and laydown areas,
- Limiting construction to daylight hours, and
- Minimizing the use of lighting to only what is required for directional and safety purposes.

Additionally, the following minimization measure will be taken to mitigate negative visual impacts;

• Provide cost-effective, sculpted concrete and staining aesthetic treatment on the East Channel Stubbe Wash bridge that serves the Pacific Crest Trail.

Once construction is completed the general character and aesthetic quality of the roadway and bridge structures are expected to be compatible with the existing visual character of the landscape and adjacent transportation corridors (I-10, UPRR). The impact to sensitive viewers within the corridor would be low and over time is not expected to result in a negative reaction from viewers as the improvements weather and age.

Conclusion

The project would not affect scenic resources within the project corridor (views of the desert landscape, mountains, wind turbines, distant horizon) or impact officially designated scenic vistas, resources or highways as none exist within the corridor. Modification of the bridge structure over the Pacific Crest Trail would not affect the overall aesthetic setting of this rustic outdoor hiking trail or change the location, elevation or context of the trail. However, removal of the bridge and rustic wooden understructure would have a negative impact on those traveling the Pacific Crest Trail. The proposed improvements would not affect views from I-10 or the regional setting in which the highway travels through.

As the new modern bridges would be similar in size, alignment and elevation to the existing timber bridges they are not expected to affect the overall visual quality of the existing corridor, block existing views or negatively affect viewers. Viewers would have low to moderate responses to the proposed changes with those responses being reduced over time as the newer materials age and blend into the desert landscape.

James Lu

From: Burton, Aaron P@DOT <aaron.burton@dot.ca.gov>

Sent: Thursday, April 16, 2020 8:36 AM

To: Lam, Trisha@DOT

Subject: Re: RCTD - 5956(228...)/Railroad Avenue - VIA Memo Review Request

Hi Trisha,

Thank you. We appreciate your professionalism and timely reviews.

Sincerely,

Aaron P. Burton
Senior Environmental Planner
Local Assistance – Environmental Support
Department of Transportation, District 8
464 West Fourth Street, 6th Floor, MS 760
San Bernardino, CA 92401-1400
(909) 383-2841

From: Lam, Trisha@DOT <Trisha.Lam@dot.ca.gov>

Sent: Wednesday, April 15, 2020 11:58 AM

To: LandArch D8@DOT <LandArch_D8@dot.ca.gov>; Burton, Aaron P@DOT <aaron.burton@dot.ca.gov>

Cc: Clark, Greg@DOT < Greg. Clark@dot.ca.gov>

Subject: RE: RCTD - 5956(228...)/Railroad Avenue - VIA Memo Review Request

Hi Aaron,

Thank you for the update, we concur with the updated VIA Memo FPN: 5956(228) sent out 4/10/2020.

Thanks! Trisha

Trisha Lam

Landscape Associate - Landscape Design

Caltrans District 8 464 W 4th St, 10th Floor, San Bernardino, CA 92401

TELEWORK- Cell (626)759-2709 or by Caltrans email

trisha.lam@dot.ca.gov

From: Ahmed, Borhan@DOT <Borhan.Ahmed@dot.ca.gov> on behalf of LandArch D8@DOT

<LandArch_D8@dot.ca.gov>

Sent: Monday, April 13, 2020 9:27:34 AM

To: Lam Trisha@DOT < Trisha Lam@dot ca

To: Lam, Trisha@DOT <Trisha.Lam@dot.ca.gov> **Cc:** Clark, Greg@DOT <Greg.Clark@dot.ca.gov>

Subject: FW: RCTD - 5956(228...)/Railroad Avenue - VIA Memo Review Request

From: Burton, Aaron P@DOT <aaron.burton@dot.ca.gov>

Sent: Friday, April 10, 2020 9:52 AM

To: LandArch D8@DOT <LandArch_D8@dot.ca.gov>

Subject: RCTD - 5956(228...)/Railroad Avenue - VIA Memo Review Request

Good morning,

Attached is the revised VIA Memo four the County of Riverside's Railroad Avenue Bridges Project under FPN: 5956(228). Please review the VIA Memo and provide comments or concurrence by 5/8/20.

Please charge your time to the following:

Project: 0000020015

Phase: N

Reporting Code: 5956228

Sub Object: 041

If you have any questions, please let me know. Thanks!

Aaron P. Burton

Senior Environmental Planner

Local Assistance – Environmental Support Department of Transportation, District 8 464 West Fourth Street, 6th Floor, MS 760

San Bernardino, CA 92401-1400

(909) 383-2841