

**The Arcata Freeway:
How it Split the Community
More Than Just Geographically**

By

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The Arcata City Council has often been subject to controversy over the years for taking stands on various national issues such as opposing the re-instatement of the military draft in 1979 and declaring Arcata a nuclear-free zone in 1986. The council's actions on local issues have also come under scrutiny by the voters. For example, in the mid-1970s questions were raised about the method of appointing a new council member without having interviewed the eight candidates. In 1978 a Times-Standard editorial accused the council of violating the Brown Act by not notifying the public of meetings. In 1989, Ruben Botello, an advocate for the homeless, threatened a recall effort when the council closed the local homeless shelter.¹

More recently, the Arcata City Council hastily passed a resolution declaring Arcata a sanctuary for conscientious objectors to the January 1991 war in the Persian Gulf. What ensued in the days to follow was a division of the Arcata community and the council members that had not been seen for almost two decades.²

Indeed, the sanctuary resolution controversy is reminiscent of the Arcata freeway battle that lasted from the 1960s through the 1970s. The expansion of the Arcata expressway to a four-lane freeway cut the city in half

geographically and it cut the community in half emotionally: local governments versus state agencies and long-time residents divided among themselves and against the students.

Suzy VanKirk, a student who was opposed to the Arcata freeway in the 1970s, referred to the January 16, 1991 resolution in the Humboldt State University Lumberjack by saying "[I] recognized some of the people speaking out against the actions of the City Council . . . as the same people who were in favor of an eight-lane [sic] highway in the early 1970s. . . the beginning of the Gulf War has revived the ongoing feud between liberals and conservatives in the council."³

In order to discuss the Arcata freeway argument of the 1970s it is important to know the history of roads in the Arcata area. The original highway through Arcata and Eureka was first graded in 1918 and surfaced in gravel in 1921. By 1925 concrete pavement was installed. As early as 1944 the state was contemplating highway improvements from the south city limits of Eureka, through Arcata, to the Highway 299 interchange. This program was listed as a high priority project dependent upon the availability of funds from the state budget. These funds were made available in the 1947 Collier-Burns Highway Act.⁴

Michael Burns and Randolph Collier were incumbent state representatives from Northern California who were instrumental

in the development of an expanded system of roads and highways throughout the state. They were especially interested in improving roads on the North Coast. In December, 1949, money from the Collier-Burns Act was appropriated for the expressway around Arcata. In 1950, the Arcata City Council approved the location of the corridor by-passing downtown Arcata (as it does today). The City of Arcata hosted a legendary opening ceremony when the by-pass was completed in 1954. The ceremony included the Arcata High School Band ^{which} ~~who~~ played as a large redwood log was cut, instead of a ceremonial ribbon. City officials, county officials, state representatives and members of the Highway Commission looked on while the log was first cut with an old-fashioned crosscut saw and then finished by a modern chain saw. The ceremony ended with fireworks and the ultra-modern, four-lane expressway by-passing downtown Arcata was opened for business.⁵ Governor Goodwin Knight dedicated the new expressway as the Michael Burns Memorial Freeway a year after the log cutting ceremony.⁶ The Governor's remarks at the dedication summed up both Collier's and Burns's feelings on the future of California's roads:

Expressways and freeways seem to be today's answer to the terrible toll that is being exacted on our highways. The records show that freeways are about four times as safe as travel on two-lane highways. As costly as they are, we must continue to build bigger and better, expressways and freeways for our people.⁷

Knight's support of the freeways of California reflected public opinion into the 1960s. As a result, between 1964 and 1968 there was little opposition expressed against the revamping of Arcata's expressway into a freeway.¹ During these years the Division of Highways (later renamed the California Department of Transportation, or Caltrans) held dozens of meetings with the Arcata City Council and Humboldt State College to discuss the project's design. The proposal called for reconstruction of a 1.7 mile segment of the existing four-lane divided expressway to an initial six-lane divided freeway with provisions for two additional lanes in the median. A four-lane frontage road was planned in front of the college on the east side of the freeway, as well as, two interchanges and on-off ramps at 14th Street. The conversion would extend from 7th Street in the south to the Arlington Way Overhead just north of the city limits, with an estimated cost of \$11,600,000. Both the council and the college incorporated this freeway design into their general and master plans as a result of the joint meetings with the state.⁸ (See Figure 1)

The Arcata City Council held its first public hearing in 1967 on the freeway in anticipation of executing an agreement with the state. According to the Humboldt State Lumberjack

¹Expressway, as defined by Caltrans, means partial access control and freeway provides full access control for cars entering and leaving the roadway.

SOURCE: Times-Standard 9 February 1974

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REQUEST FOR FEDERAL HIGHWAY ADMINISTRATION DESIGN APPROVAL FOR CONSTRUCTION OF A FREEWAY ON ROUTE 101 IN

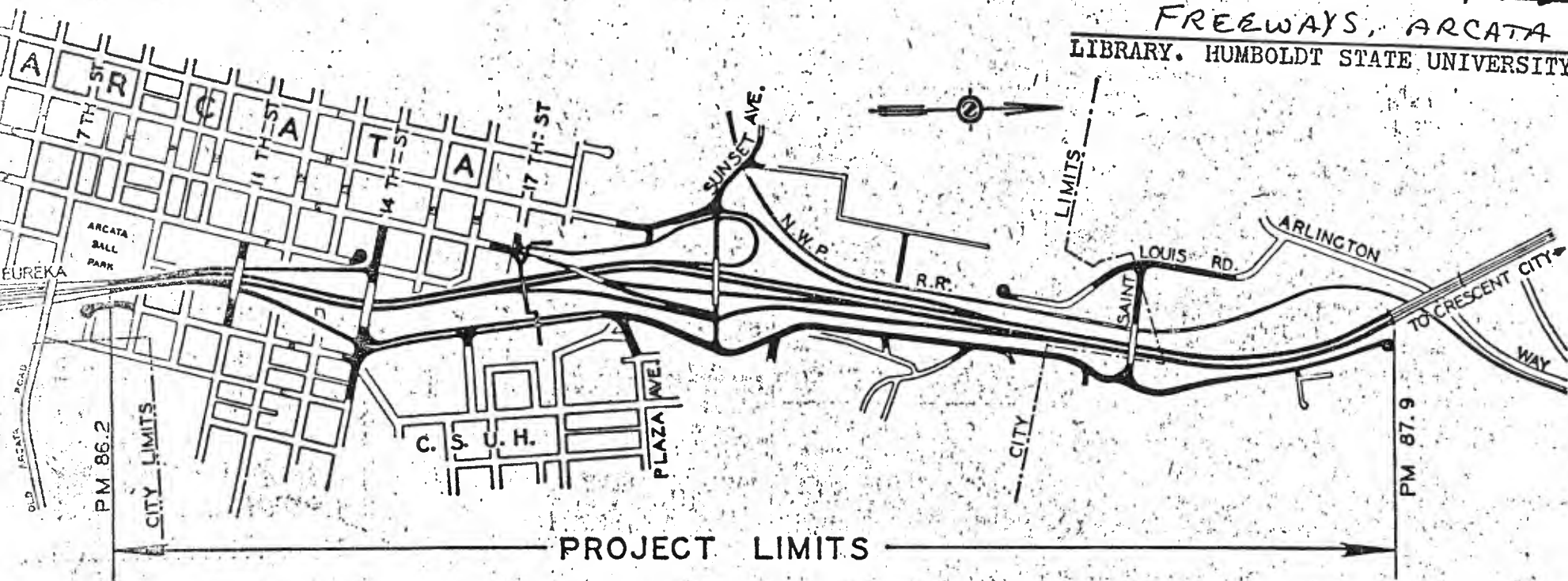
THE CITY OF ARCATA AND THE COUNTY OF HUMBOLDT

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FREEWAYS, ARCATA

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Notice is hereby given that the California Department of Transportation is submitting Federal Highway Administration approval of the design features of the proposed freeway on Route 101 between Seventh Street Overcrossing and the Arcata Interchange in the City of Arcata and the County of Humboldt. The proposals are the same ones that were shown at the Design Hearing on Tuesday, May 15, 1973, except for the elimination of one cul-de-sac. These proposals are for the construction of two interchanges and five street separations in the City Limits. Several frontage roads are to be constructed, and several streets closed.

Mapping, the approved Environmental Impact Statement, and other information pertaining to this request are available at the California Department of Transportation Office, 1656 Union Street, Eureka, California.

3/2-9

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"it was here the people of Arcata really got a good idea of what was coming."⁹

During the next year almost a dozen joint and public meetings were held. The only opposition heard was from persons of the Our Redeemers Lutheran Church at 14th and D Streets. An off-ramp in that area caused the church building to be sold subsequently to the state. Later, the structure was sold to the City of Arcata which after moving the building used it as a community center. The Lutheran Church built a new church in East Arcata.¹⁰

The City Council executed a freeway agreement with the state in March 1968, by a unanimous vote with virtually no objections from the community.¹¹

As the seventies began California was undergoing some major changes which affected Arcata and the freeway. The California Environmental Quality Act was passed, the 18-year old vote was enacted, housing and gasoline shortages arose, and the rate of inflation drove construction costs up. A publication by the Stanford Environmental Law Society, a student organization at the Stanford Law School, acknowledged the fact that it was the beginning of an era in which people across the country started to question the need for more and more roads. The Stanford research summarized the mood of the era by concluding:

. . . [there is] a need for active citizen participation at all stages of the highway (or transportation) decision-making process. Concerned citizens must keep constant pressure on legislators and other officials to stop unwarranted projects .

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Every state in the nation has had one freeway or another questioned by the community it affects. California has had freeways opposed in Los Angeles, Sacramento and San Francisco, to name just a few. Humboldt County had its share of opposition to freeways before and after the Arcata episode. For example, in 1964-65 angry protests emanated from organizations like the Sierra Club and Save the Redwoods League, as well as from some Humboldt State professors against locating a freeway through Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park. The objections resulted in the State Highway Commission withdrawing the proposed project.¹³

About the same time as the Arcata expressway expansion a controversial debate was transpiring about the Eureka bypass. The Eureka bypass had four routes that were discussed for years by the local government and the voters. Downtown business owners and community members all had objections to one or more of the four routes. The Eureka City Council finally adopted a route and signed a contract with Caltrans, only to have then Governor Edmund G. Brown, Jr. cancel the freeway budget funds.¹⁴

Several opposition groups organized sporadically throughout the two decades of the freeway controversy. In June 1970, the first group organized was the Citizens Committee for a New Hearing on the Arcata Freeway. They were the first of many groups to suggest that the freeway be reduced from six lanes to four lanes. At the next several council meetings opposition was voiced, mostly by students, against the freeway. Criticisms ranged from the fact that student housing would be demolished to the fear that the freeway would not be aesthetically appealing, but would appear as a "concrete jungle." Support came from others like Vice President for Humboldt's Academic Affairs, Milton Dobkin, who stated that the freeway was needed to aid the growth of the campus. Nonetheless, the council remained in favor of their signed agreement with the state to support the six lanes as indicated by these remarks from Councilman Ward Falor in July 1970:

. . . [the freeway is] an asset . . . it must be adequate for the foreseeable future . . . we must look at the overall picture and plan for it.¹⁵

In 1972, the opposition groups confronted state and local officials and political lines were drawn. Opposition to the six lanes began in earnest when the Stop-at-Four Committee was formed. Stop-at-Four consisted mostly of Humboldt students, many of whom were active in their first political issue since

the 18-year old vote was granted by the federal government in 1971. Another organization, the Humboldt Tomorrow group, was comprised of both students and local merchants. Both of these organizations supported further study of the proposed freeway design, the housing shortage, and the four-lane frontage road in front of the university.¹⁶

The Arcata City Council had second thoughts about the six-lane freeway. Three council members, Ward Falor, Herb Peterson and Ivan Kresten still supported the agreement with the state; however, James Fabbri started to consider the alternative of four lanes and Mayor Ervyl Pigg suggested a vote by the citizens on the issue.¹⁷

In February 1972, Suzy VanKirk represented the Stop-at-Four Committee by submitting a petition, signed by 15% of the local voters, calling for a special election on the freeway or for an ordinance prohibiting further development of the project. The next month the council turned down the initiative on a 3-2 vote, causing the group to file a writ of mandamus. The court denied the writ which demanded the local government take some action on the petition.¹⁸

The court action against the special election caused freeway opponents to become involved in the April city council elections. The freeway controversy was the number one issue in the council campaigns and student voter turnout was at an all time high. Three new members were elected to the council

to fill vacant seats as a direct result of the freeway controversy. Two of the new members were staunch opponents to the six lanes: Mrs. Alexandra Fairless (the first woman ever to serve on the council) was a student whose husband taught at Humboldt, and Rudolph W. Becking, a natural resources professor. The third new council member was a young Arcata businessman, Paul Wilson, who favored the freeway construction. Incumbent council members consisted of Pigg, who remained neutral, and Falor, who still supported the original contract. The new council immediately voted to restudy the six-lane proposal, thus, completely ignoring their written contract with Caltrans.¹⁹

During the spring and summer numerous public hearings pitted state officials and Arcata council members against the community groups. The Humboldt State Academic Senate passed a resolution opposing the widening of the freeway and the destruction of student housing. Caltrans emphasized the years of study that had taken place before the freeway was proposed and increased traffic and safety considerations which necessitated the expanded freeway design. Opponents to Caltrans complained that the hearings were being held because they were required by law, but, the state considered the freeway as fait accompli. Interestingly, the Times-Standard reported that of 200 people at a May meeting, the split between pro and con was about half and half.²⁰

Caltrans made a policy change in September 1972 as an effort to accommodate all the parties involved and to squelch community complaints. At the September 6th Arcata City Council meeting the new District Director, William Hegy, announced:

. . . we have taken a hard look at our proposed design, the availability of funds, and the operating levels of service . . . it would be feasible . . . [to] revise the project and [provide] an initial four lanes with . . . two additional lanes in the future.¹¹

The Caltrans compromise was intended to be the solution that would reflect the greatest good for the greatest number of people. However, in 1973 the controversy continued among various segments of the community. The renewed debate was over the state's Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) which was required by the newly enacted California Environmental Quality Act.

Many concerned citizens (including the opposition groups) wrote negative responses to the draft EIS. The loss of housing was a major issue addressed in these comments. Caltrans had been acquiring right-of-way land since 1968. As a result, 200 multi-family units would be removed before construction of the freeway could begin. A special Relocation Advisory Task Force was created by the State Department of Public Works to relocate displaced citizens. According to freeway opponent Jacqueline Kasun, a Humboldt State University

economic professor, the freeway would raze 14 city blocks, or 35 acres, of land at a time when housing was already unpredictable and enrollment at the college was increasing. Once again, a division was seen as some townspeople saw the homes in this area as old and in ill repair. They felt the dilapidated buildings were in need of removal.²²

Additionally, the freeway opponents argued that when the housing close to campus was removed, students would move farther away, necessitating the driving of vehicles to the campus. This would cause a two-fold problem: more traffic on city streets and less parking availability in front of the homes situated near the university. Professor Kasun wrote in her published response to the EIS that while Caltrans predicted the number of freeway accidents would be reduced, they failed to take into account the increased traffic on city streets where accidents would be on the rise.²³

At this time there was no formal organization of citizens in support of the freeway. However, during this period Caltrans received letters urging the completion of the freeway construction from many local residents. For example, native Arcatan Estelle McDowell, the daughter of William A. Preston, an early benefactor of land for the Humboldt campus, encouraged the freeway so that the dangerous access ramps of the expressway would be eliminated. Veterinarian Stuart A. Fuller, of Arcata, wrote Caltrans saying:

. . . looking back over the past 20 years it is easy for those of us who have lived in this area to realize the advantage of advanced planning that moved Highway 101 traffic off G Street and onto a four lane [expressway]. The same type of advance planning is certainly necessary now.²⁴

Even though the City of Arcata had a signed contract with the state for the freeway's construction a no-build alternative was discussed in the EIS and in later years. Wesley Chesbro, director of the Northcoast Environmental Center, wrote a critique of the EIS that said the no-build alternative should be considered to "avoid the multiple pressures which the freeway would create on space in the center of Arcata." Caltrans cited accident rate increases and a decrease in the level of service from the existing facility as reasons for rejecting the no-build concept.²⁵

The City Council passed Resolution No. 723-70 on May 2, 1973. This resolution specified nine points, which, in effect, placed the city's government in opposition to the freeway proposal. It called for four lanes and no structural changes to the existing roadway. The vote of 3-2 was comprised of Wilson and Falor in opposition and Fairless, Becking and Wild, who replaced Pigg six months earlier, in support.²⁶

Yet another opposition group was created in the fall called the Coalition for a Sensible Arcata Freeway. This outgrowth of the Stop-at-Four group filed a restraining order

against Caltrans. The suit was on the grounds that the EIS for the project failed to meet the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act. Council members Becking and Fairless joined with the Coalition in that court action. The court refused to consider the case in January 1974.²⁷

However, before the end of 1973, Dick Wild changed his mind and decided to be in favor of the freeway agreement with the state. Critics claimed he was under heavy pressure from local freeway supporters, namely Arcata business proprietors and landowners. Subsequently, the council rejected a second proposal to place the freeway question on the spring ballot.²⁸

Also, before the end of 1973, the California Highway Commission made the final approval of funds for the conversion of the expressway to a freeway, as well as, approving the EIS. Caltrans planned to have advertisements for bids out by spring 1974.²⁹

The March 1974 city elections again involved the freeway issue with high student participation. The result was the election of two new members who opposed the freeway contract: Wesley Chesbro, former director of the Northcoast Environmental Center, and Dan Hauser, a former Humboldt student and insurance claims investigator. Ward Falor did not run for reelection and Dick Wild was defeated. That left Paul Wilson, the Arcata business owner elected two years earlier as

the only council member in full support of the 1968 agreement with Caltrans.³⁰

The new council repeated a request to the California Highway Commission to reduce the size of the freeway. The response was an offer by Caltrans to eliminate two ramps. In the meantime, the Commission approved a 25% increase to the project's budget so that the freeway bids could proceed.³¹

The March election also brought on a new rush of public arguments for and against the project. As a result, Arcata's City Council requested Assemblymember Barry Keene to introduce legislation to limit the size of the freeway. Milton Dobkin, Humboldt's Acting President, refused to take a position because the freeway, as it originally was proposed, had been incorporated in their master plan while he was Vice President for Academic Affairs. Finally, an organization of local business owners was created by Wallace C. Appelon. He was the manager of A. Brizard's, Inc., a company who had been doing business on the Arcata Plaza since the early days of Uniontown. Appelon's short-lived group was comprised of 60 citizens calling themselves Arcata For-Ever. They urged no more delays in the construction of the freeway.³²

Keene refused to introduce the legislation requested by the council which caused another political rift. In a

memo to "Interested Citizens" Keene stated that he usually only introduced local legislation when it was recommended by the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors. The Board responded that the Arcata City Council never asked for their help and they wanted to remain neutral. Further, Keene felt the legislation would be difficult to get passed in Sacramento without the support from Humboldt State University.³³

In the fall of 1974, the Guy F. Atkinson Company was the low bidder on the project. There was a well-attended public hearing with state and local officials and the Atkinson Company regarding the timetable of the construction. The Lumberjack observed:

Considering how volatile the freeway issue has been in the past, the audience was for the most part subdued.³⁴

In 1975, two Humboldt professors published an article in a university publication criticizing Caltrans for overbuilding the freeway. One newspaper columnist feared this would reopen the pro and con arguments; however, during the next two years of building the only community comments came in a few letters to the editors and articles about the construction inconveniences.³⁵

After 26 1/2 months, the freeway was finally completed on October 2, 1976. The total cost was over \$14 million. The reason for going over budget was blamed by Caltrans on inflation. In stark contrast to the 1954 ceremony opening the

expressway, another ceremony was held on October 2, 1976 when this same roadway was changed to a freeway. When Caltrans asked the Arcata City Council to host the event, the council refused. In the end, the Arcata Chamber of Commerce hosted a simple ribbon cutting attended by a handful of people.³⁶

The Lumberjack ran several articles, the same month the freeway was completed, stating that even those opposed to the project were enjoying the new safety of the pedestrian crossings. Local businesses interviewed by the paper said that the freeway had little or no effect on their businesses. Even today, opponents of the freeway are surprised that the landscaping is better than expected.³⁷

In conclusion, the controversy over the expansion of the Arcata expressway to a freeway exemplifies the diverse factions that comprise Arcata's constituency. The initial favorable stand on the freeway by the conservative city council in the 1960s was replaced by the changed mood of the people in the 1970s. The legislation empowering the student vote was an important factor, as was the election of city council members with more liberal views. As the freeway was closer to being constructed the proponents were more vocal. The Arcata freeway dispute was just one of many quarrels in the community that set the stage for future divisions. The 1991 Arcata conflict over the sanctuary resolution was perhaps

summarized best by Monica Hadley, an Arcata newspaper columnist for 39 years:

. . . the Arcata City Council's "sanctuary" resolution . . . sparked a fire of protest among the so-called "silent majority." Of course, the fire had been smoldering since the early 1970s when the student vote began to influence local politics and was instrumental in voting in a liberal council -- a trend that has continued. While some council action, such as declaring Arcata a nuclear free zone, could be shrugged off as not meaning much, the act of declaring Arcata a sanctuary for conscientious objectors touched off a political explosion that had been building for years.³⁸

Endnotes

¹Times-Standard 14 September 1978; Humboldt Room-Humboldt State University "Arcata Freeway" File.

²Times-Standard 18 January 1991, 1 February 1991; The Lumberjack 30 January 1991.

³Lumberjack 20 February 1991.

⁴Alan S. Hart, "Burns Freeway: Dedicated by Governor Knight," California Highways, September-October 1955, 24-26.

⁵R. C. Kennedy, "Arcata Freeway: Unique Opening Ceremony Replaced Ribbon Cutting," California Highways, September-October 1954, 56-57.

⁶Hart, 24-26.

⁷Ibid.

⁸State of California, Department of Transportation, Final Environmental Impact Statement: Arcata Freeway, (EIS) 1973, I and 9; Times-Standard 7 March 1968; H. G. Larsen, District Engineer, "Record of Division of Highways Public Hearing Over Freeway Conversion of Route 101," 6 March 1968, 1; Lumberjack 9 October 1974.

⁹Lumberjack 9 October 1974.

¹⁰The Arcata Union 27 June 1974.

¹¹EIS, 9.

¹²Stanford Environmental Law Society, The Environment and California's Highways, November 1971, 3 and 176-177.

¹³Humboldt Room-Humboldt State University: "Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park" File.

¹⁴Humboldt Room-Humboldt State University: "Freeways - Eureka" File.

¹⁵EIS, 9; Times-Standard 16 July 1970; Union 23 July 1970.

¹⁶EIS, 9.1; "Preliminary Draft: A Freeway Project," by Humboldt Tomorrow, undated.

¹⁷Lumberjack 9 October 1974.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Times-Standard 12 April 1972.

²⁰EIS, 9.1; Union 11 May 1972; Jacqueline R. Kasun, Humboldt Economics Professor, personal interview, 25 April 1989; Times-Standard 19 May 1972.

²¹Arlene Hartin, Caltrans Personnel Officer, personal interview, 26 April 1989; William Hegy, "Arcata City Council Meeting Statement," 6 September 1972.

²²Kasun interview; Union 11 May 1972; Kasun interview; Lumberjack 9 October 1974.

²³Kasun interview; EIS, 108.

- ²⁴Estelle McDowell, letter to Caltrans, 14 September 1973;
S. A. Fuller, letter to Caltrans, 24 August 1973.
- ²⁵EIS, 44.
- ²⁶Arcata City Council Resolution 723-70; EIS, 9.3.
- ²⁷Lumberjack 16 October 1974.
- ²⁸Ibid.; Arcata City Council, Minutes, 19 December 1973.
- ²⁹Times-Standard 16 May 1973 and 17 November 1973.
- ³⁰Lumberjack 16 October 1974.
- ³¹Kasun interview; Union 27 June 1974.
- ³²Lumberjack 16 October 1974; Times-Standard 5 May 1974;
Wallace C. Appelton, letter to Caltrans, 10 May 1974.
- ³³Barry Keene, Memo to Interested Citizens, 26 April 1974;
Times-Standard 5 May 1974 and 15 May 1974.
- ³⁴Lumberjack 6 November 1974.
- ³⁵Kasun interview; Union 8 January 1976; Times-Standard
1974 through 1976.
- ³⁶Times-Standard 22 July 1976; Union 7 October 1976.
- ³⁷Lumberjack 13 October 1976.
- ³⁸Union 6 February 1991.

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