Notice of Preparation

Date: October 9, 2026

To: Reviewing Agencies, Interested Parties, and Organizations

Subject: Notice of Preparation of a Draft Environmental Impact Report for the Interstate 15 Nichols Road Interchange Project

EA: 08-1M840 **PN:** 08-22000091

The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) will be the Lead Agency and will prepare an environmental impact report (EIR) for the project identified below. We need to know the views of your agency as to the scope and content of the environmental information that is germane to your agency's statutory responsibilities in connection with the proposed Interstate (I-) 15 Nichols Road Interchange Project (Project). Your agency will need to use the EIR prepared by our agency when considering your permit or other approval for the Project.

The Project description, location, and the potential environmental effects are described below. A copy of the Initial Study (☐ is ☒ is not) attached.

Due to the time limits mandated by State law, your response must be sent at the earliest possible date but not later than 30 days after receipt of this notice.

Please send your response to Caltrans at the address or email shown below. We will need the name for a contact person in your agency.

Project Title

I-15 Nichols Road Interchange Project

Project Applicant (if any)

City of Lake Elsinore

Project Description

The City of Lake Elsinore (City), in cooperation with Caltrans District 8, is proposing to improve the I-15/Nichols Road interchange in the city of Lake Elsinore, from post mile (PM) 22.8 (0.5 mile north of Central Avenue) to PM 24.5 (2.2 miles south of Lake Street) in Riverside County. The Project proposes to widen the Nichols Road Overcrossing (OC) and ramps to improve storage capacity and increase shoulder widths to standard; add a segment of auxiliary lane on I-15 in the northbound direction; add complete streets elements such as sidewalks, crosswalks, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)-compliant curb ramps, and bicycle lanes; and add or upgrade intersection traffic control

devices. The Project would be implemented primarily along Nichols Road within and adjacent to the I-15 interchange area, with associated improvements on portions of Collier Avenue. Other Project improvements include realigning Nichols Road and providing a new bridge over Temescal Creek, west of the interchange. Refer to Figures 1 and 2, below, for Project location.

The I-15 Nichols Road interchange is listed in the fiscally constrained Regional Transportation Plan/Sustainable Communities Strategy, which was approved by the Southern California Association of Governments on May 19, 2026, under RTP ID 3A04A11. The Project is also included in the fiscally constrained 2025 Federal Transportation Improvement Program under Project ID: RIV260301.

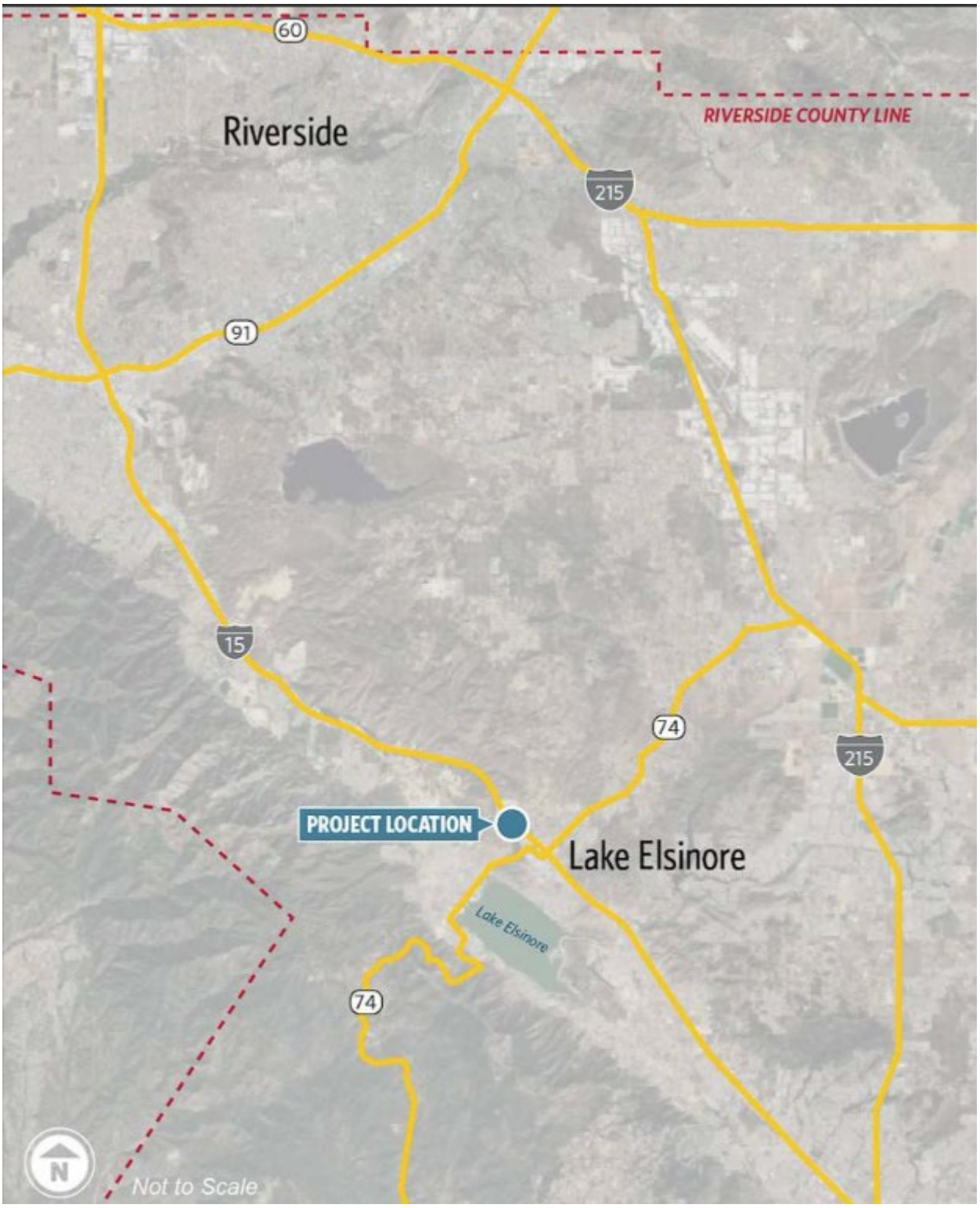


Figure 1. Regional Vicinity Map

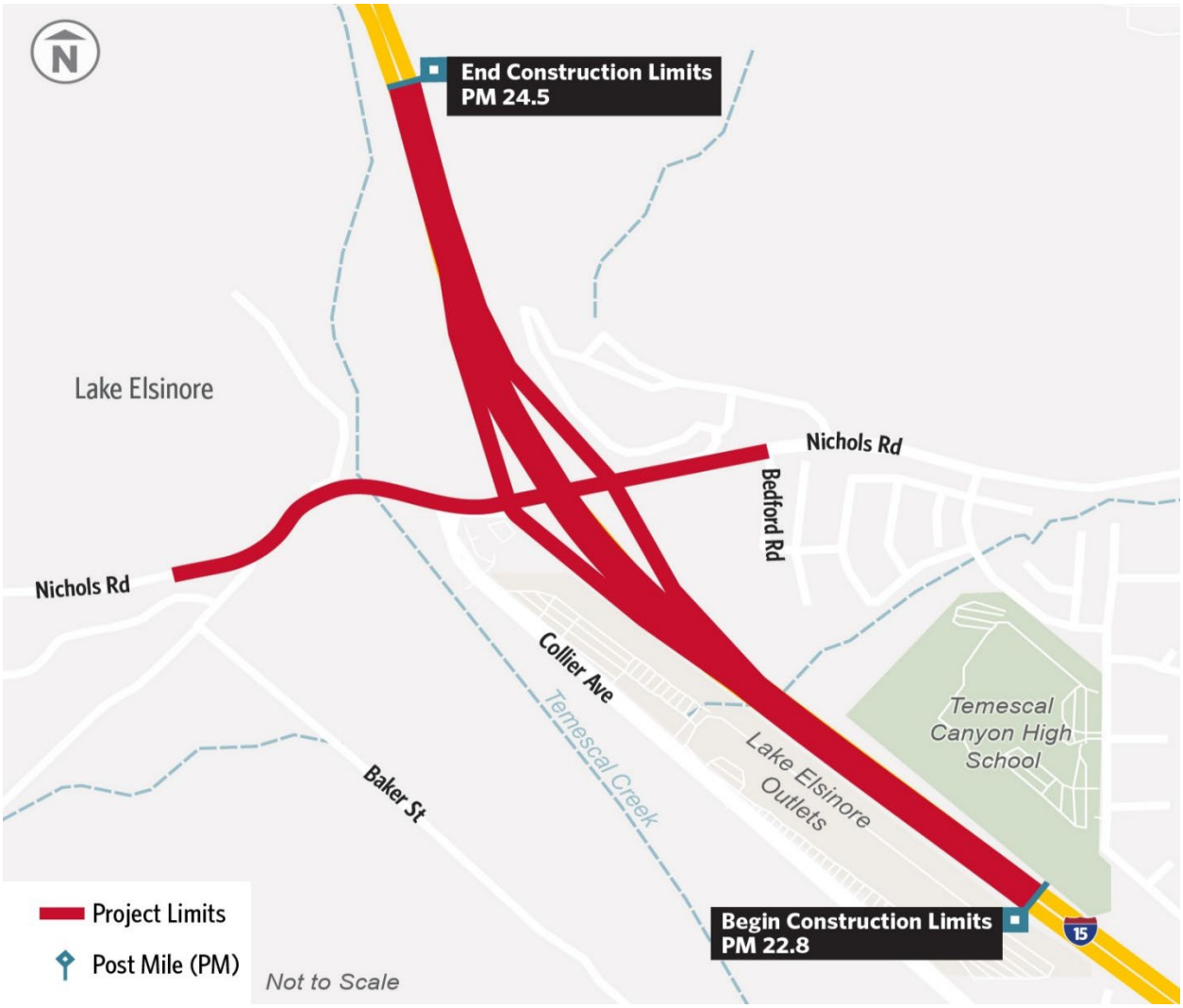


Figure 2. Project Location Map

Build Alternatives

Alternative 2: Diamond Interchange

Alternative 2 proposes to improve the existing I-15 diamond interchange in its current configuration. The I-15 Nichols Road ramps would be reconstructed, which would include widening all ramps to improve storage capacity and installing ramp metering. Portions of Nichols Road would be realigned and reconfigured and would include vehicle, pedestrian, and bicycle facilities. The existing two-span bridge structure over I-15 (Nichols Road OC) would be widened, and the realigned portion of Nichols Road would include a new multi-span bridge structure that would cross over Temescal Creek. In addition to the features described above, the Project includes additional components, such as retaining walls, noise barriers, stormwater runoff treatment devices, and

overhead signing. Portions of Collier Avenue would be reconstructed to accommodate the improvements along Nichols Road and the interchange. Refer to Figure 3, below.

Figure 3. Alternative 2: Diamond Interchange

Alternative 3: Diamond Interchange with Loop Off-Ramps

Alternative 3 proposes to modify the existing I-15 diamond interchange with the addition of both a southbound loop off-ramp and a northbound loop off-ramp that would split the movements for traffic traveling eastbound and westbound on Nichols Road from I-15. The I-15 Nichols Road ramps would be reconstructed, which would include widening all ramps to improve storage capacity and installing ramp metering. The on-ramps would also be realigned to accommodate the new loop off-ramps and would be metered. The addition of the northbound and southbound loop off-ramps would expand the overall interchange footprint beyond the existing interchange configuration and require a larger area to accommodate the additional ramp facilities than the other proposed build alternatives. Portions of Nichols Road would be realigned and reconfigured and would include vehicle, pedestrian, and bicycle facilities. The existing two-span bridge structure over I-15 (Nichols Road OC) would be widened, and the realigned portion of Nichols Road would include a new multi-span bridge structure that would cross over Temescal Creek. In addition to the features described above, the Project includes additional

components, such as retaining walls, noise barriers, stormwater runoff treatment devices, and overhead signing. Portions of Collier Avenue would be reconstructed to accommodate the improvements along Nichols Road and the interchange. Refer to Figure 4, below.

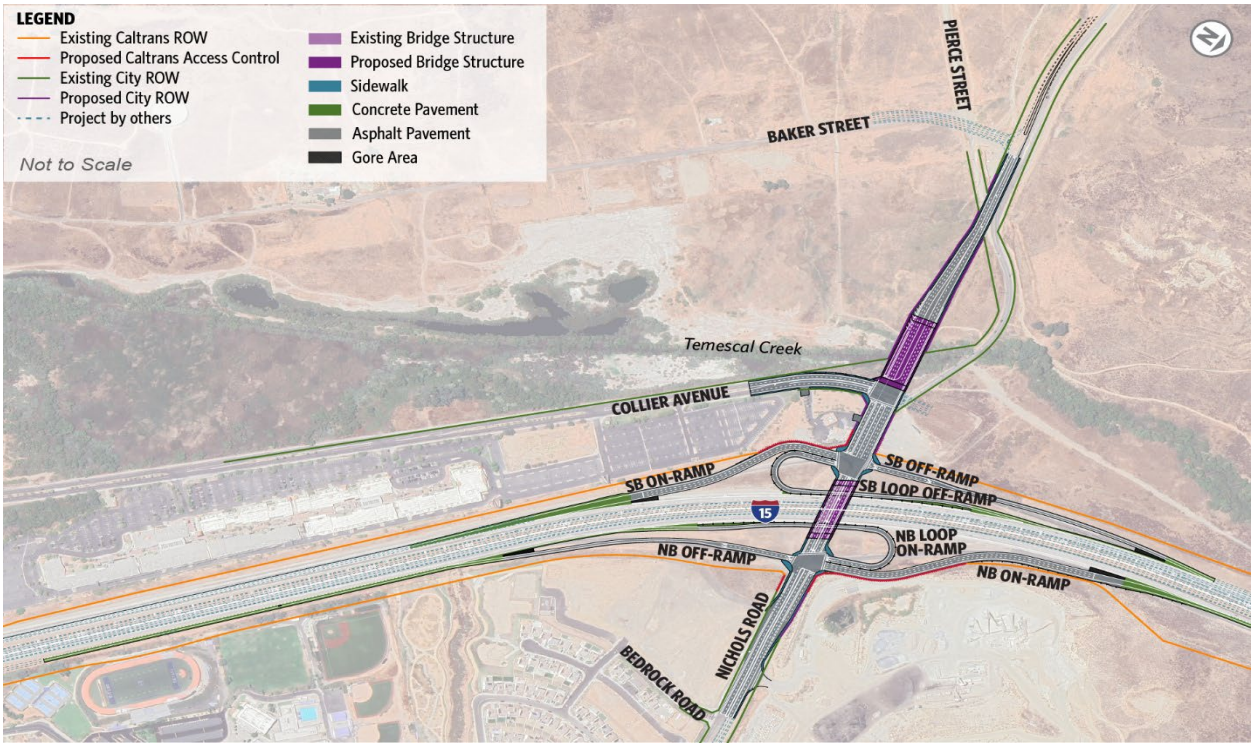


Figure 4. Alternative 3: Diamond Interchange with Loop Off-Ramps

Alternative 4: Diverging Diamond Interchange

Under Alternative 4, a diverging diamond interchange (DDI) is proposed over I-15. Starting east of the intersection of Collier Avenue, the eastbound and westbound movements along Nichols Road would transition to the left and right side, respectively, where the cross-over intersection of the DDI occurs in conjunction with the connections to the southbound on- and off-ramps. From the cross-over intersection with the proposed I-15 southbound on- and off-ramps, the Nichols Road eastbound and westbound lanes would remain parallel to one another above I-15. Continuing east, the eastbound and westbound lanes would transition back to the right and left side, respectively, at the cross-over intersection, where connections to the northbound on- and off-ramps termini would occur. From there, the Project would join existing Nichols Road west of the intersection with Bedrock Road. The I-15 Nichols Road ramps would be reconstructed, which would include widening all ramps to improve storage capacity and installing ramp metering. Portions of Nichols Road would be realigned and reconfigured and would include vehicle, pedestrian, and bicycle facilities. The existing two-span bridge structure over I-15 (Nichols Road OC) would be widened, and the

realigned portion of Nichols Road would include a new multi-span bridge structure that would cross over Temescal Creek. In addition to the features described above, the Project includes additional components, such as retaining walls, noise barriers, stormwater runoff treatment devices, and overhead signing. Portions of Collier Avenue would be reconstructed to accommodate the improvements along Nichols Road and the interchange. Refer to Figure 5, below.

Figure 5. Alternative 4: Diverge Diamond Interchange

No-Build Alternative

The No-Build Alternative would maintain the I-15 interchange and Nichols Road in their current conditions. This alternative does not satisfy the purpose and need of the Project; however, it would not preclude the construction of future improvements or general maintenance activities. As the traffic demand increases, traffic operations would further deteriorate, which may result in an increase in congestion, vehicle queuing, vehicle delay, and safety issues. No complete street elements would be incorporated into the local roadway that encourage increased use of active modes of transportation. Describing and analyzing a No-Build Alternative helps both decision-makers and the public to compare the impacts of approving the Project with the consequences of not approving the Project. Refer to Figure 6, below.

Figure 6. No-Build Alternative

Project Location

Local and Regional Setting

I-15 within the Project limits is an access-controlled six-lane divided freeway, with three 12-foot general purpose lanes in each direction, 12-foot outside shoulders, 8-foot inside shoulders, and an undeveloped 54-foot-wide median. The I-15 and Nichols Road interchange is currently a diamond configuration with one-lane stop-controlled ramps. The existing Nichols Road is an east-west roadway with one lane in each direction and stop signs along Nichols Road within the interchange.

To the west of I-15, Nichols Road intersects with Collier Avenue, crosses Temescal Creek as a low water crossing on a curved roadway alignment, intersects with Pierce Street, and then connects with Lake Street. On the east side of the interchange, Nichols Road will extend past El Toro Road and connect with the future Ethanac Expressway Corridor Project, which is anticipated to be completed in 2035.

Physical Setting and Surrounding Land Uses

The Project area is in Lake Elsinore in southwestern Riverside County, adjacent to the foothills of the Santa Ana Mountains. The surrounding area is characterized by gently rolling terrain. Temescal Creek and associated drainage features traverse portions of the Project vicinity and generally flow northwest through the Temescal Valley.

Current land uses within and surrounding the Project limits consist of commercial/retail uses, an educational institution, low-density residential areas, and undeveloped open space areas. According to the City of Lake Elsinore General Plan, portions of the Project are within the Outlet Center, Alberhill Ranch, and Murdoch Alberhill Ranch Specific Plans.

The Project is primarily in existing Caltrans, City, and Riverside County right-of-way; however, the build alternatives are anticipated to require minor partial acquisitions from adjacent private properties. No residential or business relocations would result from the proposed acquisitions.

Probable Environmental Effects of the Project

The Project could result in environmental effects on the following resources, which will be fully evaluated in the EIR/Environmental Assessment (EA):

- Air Quality
- Biological Resources
- Community
- Cultural Resources
- Cumulative Impacts
- Energy and Climate Change
- Agriculture and Forestry Resources
- Geology, Soils, Seismic, and Topography
- Hazards and Hazardous Materials
- Hydrology and Floodplain
- Land Use and Planning
- Noise and Vibration
- Traffic and Transportation
- Utilities and Emergency Services
- Visual/Aesthetics
- Water Quality and Stormwater Runoff
- Wildfire
- Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Permits and Approvals: Based on the probable effects anticipated because of the Project, the following federal and State permits and approvals could be required:

- Caltrans Encroachment Permit
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System Construction General Permit
- Santa Ana Regional Water Quality Control Board, Clean Water Act Section 401 Water Quality Certification

- California Department of Fish and Wildlife 1602 Streambed Agreement
- U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Section 404 Permit; Nationwide Permit 14
- County of Riverside Floodplain Encroachment Permit
- California Department of Fish and Wildlife Section 2081 Incidental Take Permit for Crotch's bumble bee (if it is determined through additional study that there is a potential for take)
- Western Riverside County Regional Conservation Authority Determination of Biologically Equivalent or Superior Preservation for the Western Riverside County Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan

Public Scoping Meeting

The public is encouraged to participate in the environmental review process by attending the public scoping meeting and providing comments on the proposed Project and the scope of the environmental analysis to be included in the EIR/EA. Information regarding the public scoping meeting is provided below.

- Lake Elsinore Scoping Meeting: October 28, 2026, from 5 p.m.–7 p.m.

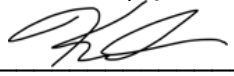
  Cultural Center
  183 N. Main Street
  Lake Elsinore, CA 92530

- Submit comments by email to I15.Nichols.Interchange.Project@dot.ca.gov or by mail to the address below.

Contact Information

Kourtney Graves, Senior Environmental Scientist
California Department of Transportation, District 8
Environmental Studies "C"
464 W. 4th Street, MS 827
San Bernardino, CA 92401-1400
(909) 472-1362
Or by email to I15.Nichols.Interchange.Project@dot.ca.gov

California Relay Service 1 (800) 735-2929 (TTY to Voice), 1 (800) 735-2922 (Voice to TTY), 1 (800) 854-7784 (Spanish and English Speech to Speech), or dial 711

Signature: 
Title: Branch Chief, Environmental Studies C

Reference: California Code of Regulations, Title 14 (State CEQA Guidelines), Sections 15082(a), 15103, and 15375.