

Road project list shrinks

By Noel Stack | City editor |

Citing a 'remarkable change in revenue,' El Dorado County Department of Transportation Director Richard Shepard presented a diminished road improvement program Tuesday.

'We lost almost \$100 million in purchasing power in this capital improvement program,' Shepard told the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors.

Single-family dwelling permits - a major economic engine behind road improvements - dropped sharply over the past two years. DOT's earlier capital improvement programs benefited from 1,200 to 1,500 permits each year in previous years, but the slowdown in the housing market has caused that figure to plummet. The new capital improvement program presented estimates just 600 permits each year for the next five years.

'We were not able to program all the projects that were in the last capital improvement program,' Shepard said. 'We had to move some out.'

Looking at the list of impacted projects, many of them in the Cameron Park and El Dorado Hills areas, Supervisor Rusty Dupray said, 'I don't like this at all.'

Projects delayed due to decreases in funding include widening White Rock Road, an extension of Saratoga Way, an extension of Headington Road from Missouri Flat Road to El Dorado Road and various improvements to Highway 50 interchanges at Bass Lake Road, El Dorado Hills Boulevard, Cameron Park Drive, Ponderosa Road and El Dorado Road.

Phase 1 of the Silva Valley Road-Highway 50 interchange, a \$9.5 million project, will move forward under the proposed plan, Shepard said. Construction should begin in the 2008-09 fiscal year. Other major projects receiving the green light if the proposed plan gets approval include extension of the carpool lanes from El Dorado Hills Boulevard up the Bass Lake Grade, \$36 million; phase 1B of the Missouri Flat Road interchange improvements, \$30.1 million; and widening Latrobe Road from Suncastr Lane to Golden Foothill Parkway, \$9.9 million.

Concerned about projects left out, the supervisors did not approve the \$536 million capital improvement program Tuesday.

'If I had to vote on this today I would vote no,' Dupray said.

Shepard will come back to the board with more information on Feb. 11 during a special workshop.

Issues to be discussed at that time include Supervisor Jack Sweeney's request to take a closer look at the criteria DOT staff used to decide which projects remained in the program and which projects got the boot. He also said DOT staff should 'really examine what we need and what we don't need' in individual projects.

In a competitive construction market, where the last few road projects funded have come in under budget estimates, Supervisor Norma Santiago said DOT should reevaluate its construction cost estimates and determine if more projects can be added back into the program.

'We need to strike while the iron's hot,' Santiago said.

The supervisors, at the suggestion of Auditor-Controller Joe Harn, also asked Shepard to evaluate the staffing needs of DOT.

'It seems like if you do fewer project you need fewer paper pushers,' Harn said. 'We have less transportation money and it would be a mistake to waste any of that.'

Placerville resident Chris Alarcon said the board should look at DOT's overhead costs, which seem high.

'There needs to be an assessment of soft costs on these projects,' said Shingle Springs resident Art Marinaccio.

A graph provided to the board breaks down the capital improvement program budget, noting that about 62 percent of the program's budget goes toward construction. Construction engineering takes 10 percent of the pie. Developer built construction projects account for 8 percent; right-of-way acquisition makes up another 8 percent and plans and specifications require another 8 percent. Environmental work for projects accounts for 3 percent and right-of-way support 1 percent.

E-mail Noel Stack at nstack@mtdemocrat.net or call 344-5065.