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County struggles with ED Hills road projects

By Mike Roberts | Mother Lode News

EL DORADO HILLS - Traffic congestion threatens an El Dorado Hills economic engine that continues to pump tax revenues into county coffers and provide a growing number of El Dorado County's precious white-collar jobs.

At a recent El Dorado Hills Town Hall meeting Supervisor Rusty Dupray put it this way: 'Most of the money is generated down here and most of the traffic problems are also down here.'

Organizers of the town hall meeting decided 'transportation' would be a timely topic, given the county supervisors' recent vote to push major El Dorado Hills freeway access projects off the Capital Improvement Program. The CIP is a list of new road construction projects that have been approved and funded for the next five years.

'We also looked at the comments from the prior town hall meetings, and decided it would be a good time to let residents send their message directly to those in charge,' said El Dorado Hills Community Services District General Manager Wayne Lowery.

CSD Board President Billy Vandegrift moderated the roughly two-hour community meeting, and brought a convivial tone to the otherwise serious topic.

A standing-room-only crowd of community-minded residents, supervisorial candidates and El Dorado Hills activists filled the Senior Center. Many asked polite questions of county Department of Transportation Director Richard Shepard and Deputy Director Russ Nygaard, backed up by Dupray and District 2 Supervisor Helen Baumann. California Highway Patrol Commander Bill Donovan rounded out the panel.

'We have the economic development here,' said Baumann, 'and we need to provide the infrastructure to support it.'

Dupray and Baumann say they are concerned about sales tax leakage into nearby Folsom, and worry that El Dorado Hills Boulevard congestion discourages drivers from getting off the freeway, or even crossing under it to shop in El Dorado Hills.

Potential El Dorado Hills Business Park tenants looking to escape the urban areas also want to know that their employees will be able to get to the freeway without crawling through a daily traffic morass in front of Town Center.

With the county's current five-year Capital Improvement Plan \$14 million over budget, road projects throughout the county were drastically cut back in February. Supervisors Dupray and Baumann opposed the distribution of road project cuts. Both went public with their disappointment after being on the losing end of the 32 vote that postponed major El Dorado Hills and Cameron Park road projects, but retained a couple large Missouri Flat Road projects in Placerville.

Shepard explained that half the CIP is funded by residential development fees in a currently stagnant housing market.

The five-year CIP for road projects dropped from \$550 million to \$536 million from 2007 to 2008. '(The decrease) doesn't sound like a lot,' said Shepard. 'But when you look at the 14 percent increase in the cost of construction, we actually lost about \$100 million in actual programming capacity.'

Current projects:

Despite the budget shortfall, the El Dorado Hills area will see about \$60 million in road projects under way by the end of summer.

'If you don't like driving through construction zones, I suggest you consider taking long vacations this and next summer,' quipped Shepard, who called the effort 'one of the largest construction programs ever undertaken in this county.'

¥ Latrobe Road realignment and widening, from White Rock Road to Business Park entrance three.

- ¥ White Rock Road realignment, from Latrobe Road west .75 miles to Manchester Drive.
- ¥ Highway 50 overpass replacement at El Dorado Hills Boulevard.
- ¥ HOV lanes from the county line to Bass Lake Road.
- ¥ Saratoga Way extension to Iron Point Road delayed

The first, and to many in El Dorado Hills, the most exasperating victim of the CIP cuts was the extension of Saratoga Way approximately 1.5 miles north along the north Highway 50 frontage to Iron Point Road in Folsom. The extension, along with the Empire Ranch freeway exchange, held the promise of a western access to El Dorado Hills - both north and south of Highway 50.

Folsom's decision to prioritize the Oak Avenue Parkway interchange over the Empire Ranch interchange also hurt the project, said Shepard. 'Without Empire Ranch, it dampens the ability of Saratoga to improve traffic.'

Shepard added that the Rancho Dorado development immediately north of the proposed extension would one day pay for much of the project, but that in the current residential slowdown, that project is 'sort of on hold.'

Most of the roadway's preliminary environmental and design work is complete, with the EIR on schedule for this fall. 'After that, it's just a matter of finding the money to build it,' said Shepard.

Silva Valley Parkway interchange pushed back:

The Silva Valley Parkway freeway interchange is the eastern component of El Dorado Hills Boulevard congestion relief. It will stand about a quarter-mile east of the current Silva Valley roadway, and provide much needed alternate access to Town Center and Serrano. The interchange will also become a critical alternative access for business park workers and future residents of the planned Blackstone residential project on Latrobe Road.

The proposed interchange will be funded by a 'Silva Valley set-aside' account, which is in turn funded by 30 percent of the road fees collected from building permits in El Dorado Hills. That fund has grown to approximately \$21.5 million, according to DOT impact fee reports, well short of the project's \$73.5 million cost. Shepard said most of the set-aside fund had been collected from Serrano Associates.

Shepard reported good progress on the environmental work and design of the interchange and corresponding pedestrian underpass, so that when funding becomes available, DOT can begin construction quickly.

El Dorado Hills Boulevard realignment:

The northern El Dorado Hills Boulevard realignment along Francisco Drive has also been pushed off the five-year horizon. Like the other delayed projects, preliminary design is complete, pending developer fees to begin work.

Other pending projects:

Four Seasons resident Bill Knox called the intersection at White Rock and Winfield roads 'an accident waiting to happen,' and wondered whether it could be signalized. The intersection is a heavily used entrance to the El Dorado Hills Business Park located a quarter-mile west of Latrobe Road.

Nygaard explained that the intersection will be improved as part of the White Rock Road improvements this year, and would get a traffic signal when The Mansour Company finalizes plans to extend Town Center into the vacant parcel southwest of Blue Shield.

Work on the pedestrian overcrossing at El Dorado Hills Boulevard also was delayed. Shepard said the project was never fully funded, and that his staff is pursuing specialized state grants to help offset the cost. Meanwhile, the new Highway 50 overpass will provide much more room for pedestrians and bikeways under the freeway.

Road maintenance:

Park Village resident Wayne Haug wondered when original Park Drive road surface would be overlaid, recalling a time when it got more traffic than Highway 50. Shepard said he wasn't aware of any plans for Park Drive, but took the opportunity to mention other resurfacing projects in the area completed last summer:

- ¥ El Dorado Hills Boulevard
- ¥ Lake Hills Drive
- ¥ Francisco Drive

Serrano Parkway and Silva Valley Road were resurfaced by Serrano, with DOT chipping in with street repairs under their resurfacing and new stop signs.

Measure Y expiration looming:

Paul Raveling suggested that the county take a more systematic approach to long-range roadway planning. He pointed out that El Dorado Hills has 10 percent of the county's population, but 25 percent of the roads. 'But that understates the traffic situation,' he said, because so many commuters travel to or through the community.

Raveling also wondered what would happen if Measure Y, which requires residential developers to pay for road improvements, expires in 2009. El Dorado County voters passed Measure Y in 1998. It has led to traffic impact fees on new construction ranging from \$15,700-\$42,400 for each single-family home.

Shepard later said county road fees are some of the highest in the state, if not the country. A reversal of Measure Y would certainly reduce fees, along with service levels. 'It would take a General Plan amendment,' he said, 'so it wouldn't happen right away.'

Dupray agreed with Raveling's tacit criticism of the county's past transportation planning, and blamed previous boards for approving development in El Dorado Hills without sufficient roadway planning. 'We've spent the last seven years and three months trying to fix that,' he said, and cited several vital road projects delivered in 2006:

¥ Serrano Boulevard connected to Bass Lake Road

¥ El Dorado Hills Boulevard repairs

¥ Green Valley Road widening

¥ Silva Valley Road extension to Town Center

'There's a lot more options for getting around now, but we're still behind the power curve,' he said. 'We should have had the Silva Valley interchange built by now.'

Dupray recalled \$3,000 to \$4,000 road fees per new house when he and Baumann took office. 'Had they been \$7,000, today those fees might be \$10,000 or \$12,000.'

Timed lights:

El Dorado Hills architect Jeff Haberman wondered why the lights on El Dorado Hills Boulevard aren't timed. 'It's killing traffic in this town.'

Shepard explained that the lights are independently activated by separate 'loop detectors,' which sense the presence of a vehicle at the intersection. Synchronizing the lights would require a costly traffic controller and fiber optic wiring between intersections.

He said he hopes to win grant funding to help pay for the system, but getting an integrated system up and running is at least two years out, he said.

Several audience members felt that the traffic lights in front of Town Center and the 76 station were previously coordinated, and that the current situation had appreciably worsened.

Nygaard promised to have the signals checked out, and added that the westbound exit ramp will eventually loop up and over El Dorado Hills Boulevard and come back around to a four-way intersection west of the 76 station, eliminating one of problem signals.

A balancing act:

With the county's CIP still \$14 million in the red, and residential development not showing signs of picking up immediately, Shepard later said transportation funding has built-in checks and balances. 'People forget that when growth slows, the need for these projects also decreases.'

Supervisors Baumann and Dupray made it clear that they feel the need for better freeway access in El Dorado Hills is overdue, and critical to its continued economic vitality.