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Future of Highway 49 up for discussion

By Charlotte Sanchez-Kosa | Special to the Democrat |



FIELDING QUESTIONS-Kim Pallari, holds an information card while Dan Bolster of the El Dorado County Transportation Commission answers questions during the workshop on Thursday. Photo by Charlotte Sanchez-Kosa

Questions, questions and more questions. That is what members of the El Dorado County Transportation Commission faced as they held the first of two open houses connected with the possible realignment of Highway 49.

The event, held in the Marshall building at the El Dorado County Fairgrounds on Thursday, drew a large number of attendees interested in the project because those who live in El Dorado County are well aware of the challenges faced by the commission in looking at realignment.

“Public involvement in any project is a key element,” said Dan Bolster of the EDCTC. “By you coming here tonight and involving yourself in the project, it just makes it a better project. This is just the first step in many steps in developing this transportation project.”

The section of Highway 49 that is drawing the commission’s attention stretches from El Dorado to Coloma. The road not only runs through some populated areas but also through hills and curves and then passes through the Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park where it poses a risk to visitors. The EDCTC recently received a Partnership Planning Grant from Caltrans of \$250,000 for the study.

As the meeting progressed, Bolster said because the project is still in its infantile stage, officials may not be able to answer questions posed by attendees.

“Those kinds of questions are the ones that we need you to ask because they’re the ones that this study is attempting to answer,” Bolster said. “Ask your questions and we’ll record them and through the course of the study, we will respond to the questions you’ve asked tonight.”

Bolster said a stakeholder advisory committee had been appointed and those representatives would share information about the study.

He added that the project development process is akin to an eight-step process that includes identifying the project, project study report, project funding, a draft project report, an environmental document and then a final report. Once the final report is finished, then the design and build phase kicks in.

“We are probably six years away from knowing exactly where a potential alignment might go,” Bolster said. “We are very early, early on in the process.”

Bolster said about a year ago transportation officials met to discuss the issues along Highway 50, El Dorado and Coloma. At that time officials agreed that there was significant congestion in the area between El Dorado and

Diamond Springs and there will be future development in that area and the congestion will increase. Looking at Placerville, Bolster said that Highways 50 and 49 intersect at the same grade level and cause congestion. He pointed out that Highway 49 runs through curving roads in a residential area of Placerville. He also said the road from Placerville to Coloma is an old wagon road alignment.

The floor was then opened to questions and residents asked about the stakeholders, where the funding was coming from, destroying agriculture areas, new subdivisions and voiced other concerns.

One county resident said the people are the stakeholders in the project. He emphasized that people not formally represented by organizations need to be heard. He also said Highway 49 was meant to be a historical route following the Gold Rush gold vein. It was not intended to be a swift parkway.

He added there is consensus on what needs to be done but wanted to know what guarantee there was that the alignment would not go through agricultural land and woodland areas and ultimately open them up to subdivision sprawl.

He also asked about 19 proposed subdivisions that are controversial and may not get the OK. He said for officials to argue for road sizing and routing based on those subdivisions is to follow a special interest alignment of how the county will look instead of listening to area residents.

Bolster said the study is going to be responsive to and consistent with the General Plan of El Dorado County and the criteria that are being developed include community impact.

"We're looking for a way to address the very issues that you brought up," Bolster said.

Bolster encouraged attendees to go to the Website at <http://www.edctc.org/index.htm> and comment on the information via e-mail.

Following further questions, transportation officials emphasized they were not presenting any alternatives as it was too early to do so.

As the meeting ended, residents got the chance to ask officials additional questions and look at related materials.

Harry Mercado, 67, of Lotus, said he thinks the realignment is a good idea.

"Highway 49 has some terrible flaws in it that they've already identified," Mercado said. "It cuts through Marshall Park. It has 15 miles per hour curves in it. It doesn't have an overpass over Highway 50. It is congested in the Diamond Springs area so it has all these flaws and the Transportation Commission wants to fix it, so I am for that."

Bob Casper, 54, the Greenstone Country Traffic Safety Committee chair, said he thinks it's good that officials are getting people together early on. He also said he thinks there needs to be some modifications to the roadway.

"One of the things that I would recommend is that they come to these meetings with more clarity," Casper said. "They've got it written down but it's pretty nebulous. They have key words in there like safety and community but they really didn't explain what they are really trying to achieve. They didn't mention the traffic of the school buses and that kind of stuff."

He added the community has two opposing positions with one wanting rural and the other wanting rural but also wanting to get from here to there more quickly. He said the problem will be how to satisfy both.

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