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When Alyson met Jack a committee was formed; Sweeney bristles at Huber's claim of lack of representation on Transportation Commission

By Mike Roberts | Mother Lode News

Freshman Assemblywoman Alyson Huber, D-El Dorado Hills, appeared before the El Dorado County Transportation Commission on May 7 to make the case that her bill, AB 1204, opens a much-needed dialogue about the commission's makeup.

After some concerted grousing, the commissioners agreed to countywide hearings conducted by an advisory committee. Huber might have expected a warmer reception by the commission if she'd consulted them before introducing legislation that alters their makeup.

Her bill, as written, would expand the commission to nine members, with all three new commissioners from the El Dorado Hills Community Services District board. But Huber insists that the bill's language was just a place holder, a starting point intended to open a dialogue on the commission's makeup.

"This is the beginning of the conversation, not the end," she said. "I'm not pushing through the bill as it is currently drafted."

Commission membership was most recently defined by 1996 legislation that locked in three Placerville City Council members and three El Dorado County supervisors. Caltrans and the City of South Lake Tahoe each hold non-voting advisory seats on the commission.

Huber's District 10 includes parts of four counties. In El Dorado County she represents only El Dorado Hills and one precinct in Cameron Park.

The commissioners expressed public frustration with Huber in interviews leading up to the May 7 meeting. Huber responded that her constituents were also frustrated by a lack of representation on the commission.

El Dorado County Department of Transportation Director Jim Ware preceded Huber with a brief presentation on the 2002-2012 DOT Capital Improvement Plan, 59 percent of which was spent in El Dorado Hills.

Ware explained that fees collected in El Dorado Hills are spent locally, whereas fees collected in the rest of the county are often spent outside the area they are collected.

DOT's funding comes from developer-paid building fees and the county general fund, whereas the Transportation Commission typically programs funding from grants and state transportation bonds.

Commissioner Jack Sweeney explained that the Board of Supervisors controls the vast majority of county transportation funding and that anyone concerned about road funding in El Dorado Hills start at the Board of Supervisors, not the Transportation Commission.

Sweeney also said he was looking forward to hearing how "35 percent of the people getting most of the funding want more representation."

Huber greeted the commissioners individually and said she came to set the record straight.

"This isn't about past decisions or garnering more transportation funding for El Dorado Hills," she said. "It's about representation in a growing and changing county."

"Members of my community don't feel they are represented," she said. "We all want our constituents to feel like they're represented, that just good government."

Huber said she'd discussed the commission makeup "throughout the county," and felt it was time to "have the conversation."

She pointed out that the commission's makeup is codified in stone by legislation. "For at least this brief two-year window, we've got a member of the Assembly from El Dorado County that can introduce legislation, which is what it will take to change this."

Huber said the heavily gerrymandered Assembly District 10 is rarely represented by El Dorado County, and she wanted to make “the good government reforms we need in this county.”

Huber admitted that “in the perfect world” she would have talked to the commission before submitting her legislation, but stopped well short of a public apology.

“I wanted to take this opportunity to examine the way our local government is structured, and put a vehicle in the Legislature that allows us to have a discussion,” she said.

Most counties have changed the makeup of their transportation commission since the 1970s, she said. Different models of representation have evolved to reflect how county populations have changed.

Huber mentioned that the Assembly’s Local Government Committee is considering hearings to review how transportation commissions in other counties represent their constituency.

That prompted Sweeney to ask Huber if she thought the state should dictate the commission’s composition. “You’ve got the club, the ability to submit legislation,” he said. “So what will the process be?”

Huber made it clear that despite the current bill’s specific language, she doesn’t intend to mandate any specific commission makeup, and reiterated that the bill was meant as a catalyst for local discussion, “and I think we’re already seeing that,” she said.

She insisted that she’s not trying to stack the commission, merely expand the participation. “We’re not alone, we have 57 other counties to look at and a fabulous director who probably has some good ideas.”

“You say our representation is unfair, but I was the supervisor that led the battle to start the HOV lanes in El Dorado Hills,” said Sweeney. “I busted my tail to get that job going, and to keep it going after the state withdrew their funds.”

Sweeney said he was “taken aback” by Huber’s implication that he represented Placerville on the commission. “And I’m disturbed to hear that all the sudden we need guidance in how to fix our transportation commission.”

“I don’t even know what we’re trying to fix,” he said. “Looking at the numbers, it doesn’t look like it’s broken. We think it’s pretty fair how the transportation money gets spread out.”

Huber conceded that Sweeney’s constituents might not think there’s a problem with the way the Transportation Commission is drawn up, “but my constituents do,” she said.

“If there’s something broken in the transportation funding process it’s that this county is paying over 75 percent of the cost to rebuild Highway 50,” said Sweeney. “We should be spending our money on local roads.”

He told Huber she could best serve her El Dorado Hills constituency by finding (state) transportation dollars for them.

Commissioner Mark Acuna recapped his five years on the commission and his service on the Transit Board. “There’s not a lot of glamour in transportation planning,” he said. “We do this because we’re committed to the broader community, not just Placerville. To think that one particularly vocal group can come in and require me to disenfranchise other areas of this county is inappropriate.”

Huber replied “This isn’t an attempt to pit one part of the county against another. But I think it’s a conversation we should be having. If we hold public hearings and no one thinks this is a problem, I won’t move forward on the bill.”

She proposed public hearings throughout the county, moderated by someone with familiarity with the formulas used by other transportation commissions. “It’s a two-year bill,” she said. “We have time to develop a process that works for everyone.”

Commissioner Ray Nutting warned Huber that she needed to identify a more concrete problem before taking her message to the rural parts of the county. “Once you point out where the revenue is going - you’ll have to explain why they aren’t getting any projects in their area. Think about who’s going to feel most disenfranchised and who’s most going to want to sit on a newly formed Transportation Commission.”

Commissioner John Knight proposed DOT or the Sacramento Congress of Governments (SACOG) as knowledgeable third parties that might be willing to conduct the hearings.

Sweeney said he’d rather reinstitute the Transportation Commission’s citizen advisory committee, and make them responsible for the hearings. The commission agreed and asked Mathews to work out the details and bring a proposal to the June meeting.

Hagen wondered why Huber hadn't come directly to the commission with her concerns. "We could have avoided a lot of this," he said, then reminded Huber that he was in Washington, D.C., last week pursuing \$13.5 million in federal funds for the Silva Valley interchange in El Dorado Hills. "In the future, if you have concerns, please come to us early on."

Huber stuck around for the public comment portion of the meeting, and took the vitriol aimed her way in stride.

Huber agreed to abide by the findings of the advisory committee and hearings.

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