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Assembly woman Huber spearheads effort to change county Transportation Commission

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EL DORADO HILLS - Residents here turned out in force last week for a pair of informative transportation meetings - and turned the heat up on an issue that's been simmering in the little understood Transportation Commission since former El Dorado County Supervisors Rusty Dupray and Helen Baumann were in office.

Last Monday El Dorado Hills was brought up to speed on the large road projects in the area in a prime time Department of Transportation show-and-tell. A day later an estimated 160 residents and government officials overflowed the El Dorado Hills Library meeting room. Most were there to lobby for greater representation on the county Transportation Commission.

The county Transportation Commission is not a county agency. It lobbies for and eventually "programs" federal and state road and trail dollars, which make up less than half of Western Slope road spending annually.

The six member commission is currently made up of three county supervisors, two of whom represent El Dorado Hills: John Knight and Ray Nutting. Three Placerville City Council members also sit on the commission, one of whom is Jack Sweeney, who represents Placerville's district.

The turnout at Tuesday's meeting left no doubt that the resulting four-seat Placerville majority has become a sore point in El Dorado Hills. Baumann and Dupray tried to get the commission to consider its "governance structure" during their last year on the commission, 2008, with several respected El Dorado Hills residents: T. Abraham, Paul Raveling, Norm Rowett and John Knight (speaking as a resident) all encouraging the commissioners to take a look at their makeup during July and August discussions.

Even friend-of-the-commission Bob Smart, who lives in Diamond Springs, encouraged a review of the commission makeup.

But subcommittees formed to explore options never got off the ground, with Placerville representatives insisting that they fairly represented the entire county, and that El Dorado Hills already had two seats at the table and was getting its fair share - more perhaps - of federal and state transportation dollars.

"It's akin to taxation without representation," said District 10 Assemblywoman Alyson Huber, who represents and resides in El Dorado Hills. She's leading the charge to review the makeup of the commission, and has introduced legislation that calls for a commission "comprised of individuals equally balanced from all regions within El Dorado County."

The current commissioners, originally disgruntled that Huber initiated the legislation without consulting them, opted to go along, forming a 12-member advisory committee to hold meetings around the county to measure public sentiment on the commission makeup, judge whether the current makeup is fair and if not, recommend alternatives.

Huber's bill won't be heard until the next legislative session, which starts in January 2010. By then she wants to tighten up the language to reflect the committee's recommendation.

The El Dorado Hills meeting was the fourth of six such gatherings, but the first to be well attended. The first three meetings were held in rural areas of the county, some of which have no direct representation on the commission.

According to some members of the committee, the loudest comments heard in the early meetings were complaints that the process consumed time and energy that could be better spent on the fiscal challenges facing the county.

Cynics in the room last week conjectured that Democrat Huber's bill is an attempt to win broader support in largely Republican El Dorado Hills, where she fared poorly in the 2008 elections despite her home field advantage.

Politics aside, few on hand Tuesday questioned the fact that the commission makeup is antiquated.

Membership was most recently prescribed by 1996 legislation that locked in three representatives each for the city of Placerville and El Dorado County by name. Caltrans and the city of South Lake Tahoe each have non-voting advisory seats.

That formula denies El Dorado Hills or Cameron Park a seat on the Transportation Commission even if they were to become incorporated cities.

Several prominent El Dorado Hills residents had specific suggestions to improve the balance of the commission. All had one thing in common: fewer Placerville seats.

Residents of the Four Seasons Active Adult community have become increasingly active in local politics over the last few years. Jon Jakowatz, vice chairman of the Four Seasons Civic League, proposed a transportation commission makeup of elected officials from each of the four Western Slope supervisorial districts, plus one seat for each city, public utility district and qualifying community services district.

El Dorado Citizens' Alliance President Paul Raveling followed, suggesting a new transportation advisory committee specifically for El Dorado Hills road issues. "We have 43,000 people here," he said. "That makes us the largest population center in the county. We have correspondingly big transportation needs."

Vision Coalition Director D.J. Peterson asked for better bike trails and public transit options for El Dorado Hills youth. "We're four times the size of Placerville, but we have no buses to get kids to the teen center. We're not even on the El Dorado Transit map."

Cameron Park resident Dupray served as District 1 supervisor, Sacramento Area Council of Governments representative and transportation commissioner from 2000 to 2008. "People have often asked me if this is really a problem," he said. "There is a problem. It needs to be better balanced."

Contacted later by phone, Dupray confirmed that "cooperation dropped off" in his last two years on the commission. "Placerville has a clear, dominant position on the commission," he said, "and they don't want to give it up."

Next up, El Dorado Hills resident and El Dorado Irrigation District board member Harry Norris said that redistricting requirements ensure that supervisorial districts will follow population, and that giving each district a seat would guarantee a balanced representation.

El Dorado Hills Fire Board member and Area Planning Advisory Committee Chair John Hidahl recommended looking at how the Local Area Formation Commission board is made up, with two of its seven seats filled by special districts.

After reviewing the makeup of several other California transportation commissions, Huber suggested a "four and one" model, which would provide one seat for each Western Slope supervisorial district, plus one for each incorporated city. "At a minimum we need to change this law so that any incorporated city is included," she said.

She added that she'd promised the commissioners that she'd drop her bill if no one turned out at the public meetings. Gesturing to the overflow crowd, she said. "That hasn't happened."

The effusive assembly woman thanked the audience for "demonstrating that this wasn't some crazy thing I came up with, that my constituents are concerned about this issue."

Committee member Robert Casper lives in Greenstone. He asked the audience whether anyone could name a specific instance of an unfair decision from the Transportation Commission. "I haven't heard any actual problems mentioned," he said.

No one present could or would mention any specific problem. One resident eventually got up and praised the commission's decisions, adding, "The problem is we don't have the representation we want."

Huber expanded on the response. "If you remember the Boston Tea Party, it wasn't about the services the British provided; it was about differing value systems.

"People come to the table with their own life experience and value systems that reflect their community," she said. "That's not to say that they're not trying to make decisions in the best interest of the whole county."

Committee member Art Marinaccio earned the ire of the El Dorado Hills audience by voicing a concern over the implication that commission members represent "narrow parochial interests, rather than looking at the entire county."

Given the fact that no one would fault the commission's decisions, Marinaccio wondered if altering it would

introduce a problem. "Advocating a constituency rather than dealing with the transportation business of the county won't help the overall situation," he said. "That just hasn't been the way the Transportation Commission has operated."

"We're not questioning the integrity of the commissioners," said Huber, deflecting Marinaccio's parry. "We are questioning the representation model. Democracy includes a fundamental right to representation. I haven't heard any justification for having three members from Placerville and three supervisors from the entire rest of the county."

El Dorado Hills resident Rachel Michelin also sits on the committee, and sent out an e-mail encouraging El Dorado Hills residents to attend the meeting to refute "the people in this county who do not think EDH should have any representation, but have no problem taking our tax revenue and using it for projects up the hill."

During the meeting she said she'd met people throughout the rural portions of the county who didn't feel like they were represented, adding that public agencies have the responsibility to make people feel represented.

"There's something to be said for having people on the commission who are driving the streets every day," she said. "We need to crack open the egg in Placerville and let more people in our county be involved in the decision making process."

District 1 Supervisor John Knight echoed comments he made during the July 2008 Transportation Commission meeting, asking the committee, "If we were doing it from scratch, what should it look like?"

Transportation Commission Chair Carl Hagen holds one of the contentious Placerville seats. He told the El Dorado Hills audience that he represents the residents of the entire county on a number of commissions and boards, including LAFCO and SACOG.

"The city of Placerville doesn't run the Transportation Commission," he said. "When I take off my City Council hat and put on a Transportation Commission hat or a Transit District hat, I represent a larger constituency, not just Placerville."

District 2 Supervisor Ray Nutting attempted to put things into perspective by pointing out that El Dorado Hills was not alone. "Every part of my district feels under-served by county services," he said, adding that large portions of the county, including Rescue, Georgetown and Pilot Hill in District 4, don't have any representation on the Transportation Commission.

"The county has 1,127 linear miles of road," he said. "The Transportation Commission deals with pass-through revenue from the federal and state government, the majority of which is spent on Highway 50. The majority of that, over \$100 million in the last 10 years, is spent between Cameron Park and the county line."

Despite the intensive two-day primer on county road funding, many left the library on Tuesday night still believing that "Placerville got money for Missouri Flat from El Dorado Hills," a misconception born out of a debate held at the Board of Supervisors, not the Transportation Commission, in early 2008 over which projects to include in the five-year capital improvement plan.

With development at a standstill, and no road fees in the immediate pipeline, those arguments have largely become moot.

Nonetheless, that issue touched a nerve in El Dorado Hills, and brought attention to the makeup of the unrelated Transportation Commission.

What's next

The next public forum on the makeup of the El Dorado County Transportation Commission will be held in Placerville at the El Dorado County Fairgrounds on Oct. 20 at 6 p.m. in the Organ Room. Two weeks later, Nov. 3, the advisory committee will be in Cameron Park at the new CSD building, 3200 Country Club Drive at 6 p.m.