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Residents consider alternate routes between Coloma, El Dorado

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Top-ranked alternatives to the historic Highway 49 route through the heart of El Dorado County would accomplish two key objectives, but area residents say they would do little to improve safety or traffic flow.

From an initial list of 52 potential alignments of an approximately 14-mile stretch of the narrow, winding state highway between Coloma and the town of El Dorado, three alternatives have been selected for further analysis. A \$250,000 study, launched earlier this year by the El Dorado County Transportation Commission and funded by the state Department of Transportation, is to be completed in March.

"This is ... a fact-finding mission," said Dan Bolster, a transportation planner with the county Transportation Commission. A new route wouldn't be built for eight to 10 years, he said.

Two key objectives are rerouting the highway to bypass Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park in Coloma and eliminating the at-grade crossing of Highway 50 in Placerville.

With minor exceptions, the routes would use existing roads, or roads that El Dorado County or the city of Placerville plan to build.

Where possible, roads in a new route would be brought up to state highway standards with two 12-foot travel lanes and 8-foot shoulders, said consultant Keith Rhodes.

Two of the proposed routes go through western Placerville. The other follows Green Valley Road to Missouri Flat Road, skirting the city.

Highway 49 was built to link California's Gold Rush towns, and Placerville officials have said they would like a portion of any new alignment to remain within the city.

About 100 people attended a Wednesday night open house in Placerville to discuss potential realignment.

Several people argued that other routes could more easily be brought up to state highway standards. They suggested following the lead of tour bus drivers who typically travel Lotus and North Shingle roads between Coloma and Highway 50.

"Shouldn't one of the major considerations be how you're spending our tax dollars?" asked Placerville resident Judy Mathat.

A route following Lotus and North Shingle roads, Mother Lode Drive and El Dorado Road would be a good engineering choice, Rhodes said. But the project also is intended to improve east-west travel between Placerville and El Dorado.

Several residents said that won't be achieved by using congested Missouri Flat Road.

Others objected to including Cold Springs Road in a new alignment, saying it has one of the highest accident rates in the county.

Rhodes said concerns voiced at the open house will be addressed in the analyses, and lower-ranked alternatives could be considered as the project progresses.

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