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## Transportation Commission advisory group comes up short

By Mike Roberts | Mother Lode News

An ad-hoc advisory committee tasked with studying the El Dorado County Transportation Commission's makeup, measuring public sentiment and making recommendations to address El Dorado Hills-based concerns that the commission membership hasn't kept up with county population shifts wrapped up a series of public meetings on Tuesday.

The group agreed that all cities deserve inclusion on the commission, but ran out of time before tackling how the commission might accommodate any new cities. More importantly to those who raised the issue, the committee failed to address how the commission makeup might be altered to better represent the entire county.

The six-member commission is currently made up of three Placerville City Council members and three El Dorado County supervisors, one of which represents a district that includes Placerville, two represent El Dorado Hills districts.

El Dorado County roadwork is funded by an intertwining relationship between the county Department of Transportation, which is funded primarily through developer fees and the county General Fund, and the Transportation Commission, which works with a smaller budget from state and federal grants, state transportation bonds and recently, federal stimulus dollars.

The committee agreed that the Transportation Commission's decisions had been sound and fair, but that it suffers from a perception problem.

"It's not about funding," said committee member Rachel Michelin, who evolved as the de facto spokesperson for altering the current commission structure. "It's a perception that the residents of this county aren't being equally represented on this commission."

Art Marinaccio was also on the committee, often voicing the opposing view. "Perception being more important than reality has been the theme of this whole discussion," he said. "El Dorado Hills residents currently have two representative on the commission, and if they hadn't voted down incorporation would likely have had more by now."

The committee held six public meetings around the county, hearing public comment on the makeup of the little understood commission as best they could. The gatherings were poorly attended, with one glaring exception: El Dorado Hills, where Assemblywoman Allison Huber, D-El Dorado Hills, sent a post card to each home encouraging their attendance.

Huber's Assembly Bill 1204 calls for a commission makeup "comprised of individuals equally balanced from all regions within El Dorado County outside of the Tahoe Basin."

Huber proposed the bill because current legislation hard-wires Placerville and El Dorado County, exclusively, by name, onto the commission. If El Dorado Hills or Cameron Park ever incorporate as cities, they'd still be denied representation on the Transportation Commission.

The commissioners formed the advisory committee as a result of Huber's bill, which won't be heard until the next legislative session. By January, she wants to tighten up the language to reflect the committee's recommendation.

The agenda for the final advisory committee deliberation session, which was held on Nov. 17 at the new Cameron Park Community Center, and facilitated by Wendy Hoyt, called for the "development of a recommendation with respect to the representative composition of the El Dorado County Transportation Commission."

But it wasn't to be. In two hours of civil but often heated discussion, the committee failed to consider any alternate commission configurations. They did, however, agree that any new cities should be represented on the commission, but were mixed on whether the commission should only include elected officials.

Michelin held out for the possibility of non-electeds on the commission, an important consideration in getting greater representation for El Dorado Hills, which, because it isn't an incorporated city, has few elected officials, but lots of talent, much of it retired and willing to serve, but unwilling to incur the rigors of an election.

She argued that the supervisors are currently overburdened, suggesting "Let's take something off their plate."

Marinaccio felt strongly disagreed, arguing that the "electeds" are much better at "dialing for dollars," in both Sacramento and Washington, D.C.

Michelin countered, "There are some very accomplished fund raisers in this county that are not elected," and reiterated her call for a more inclusive, open government.

"Why not let more people be involved in the process?" she said. "That will go a long way to addressing the perception problem."

Committee member Carol Patton pointed out that Transportation Commission actions typically originate in the Policy Advisory Committee, and wondered if some structured way to include the unincorporated areas of the county at that level might address the representation concern.

Marinaccio agreed, and suggested that the Department of Transportation, which makes more transportation decisions than the Transportation Commission, might also be a good place to get involved. "The DOT's TIM Fee Working Group, the group that renegotiated Measure Y, is currently about 40 percent from El Dorado Hills," he said.

Committee member John Schmit, a Placerville resident, made the best case for a revised commission makeup. He outlined how the commission's composition was established in 1970, at a time when the county's population was about 43,000, which is roughly the current population of El Dorado Hills and its outlying areas.

"The issue here is whether the commission represents the west county communities, and whether the commission will make decisions based on everyone's best interests," he said. "With Placerville having three commissioners representing 10,000 out of 160,000 people, no matter how unbiased they are they still have their local prejudices."

Even though the commission may have acted in good faith in the past, he continued, "the structure of the current commission is perceived to be unbalanced."

The members that supported change commented that they'd like to see a fluid and durable commission structure that accommodates population shifts as the county continues to grow.

Several members also wanted to insure that the commission was balanced between county and city, so that no one agency could ever dominate the process.

In the waning moments, the committee also concluded that the commission's perception problem could be diminished if both the Department of Transportation and the Transportation Commission did a better job explaining how project decisions are made, and educating the public on the complicated transportation funding process.

The two hours were up before the committee could consider any specific alternative commission structure; before it could discuss how other counties structure their commissions, or any of the alternatives suggested by the public in prior meetings.

Facilitator Hoyt informed the committee that it would take a consensus vote to extend the deliberations, and asked the committee members if they were ready to close the meeting with no further recommendations. Several members indicated they were done.

But committee member Schmit, who'd been quiet in prior meetings, was clearly frustrated. "I feel like we've totally failed as a committee," he said. "Placerville is overrepresented and the rest of the county is underrepresented and we haven't proposed anything here other than to say, 'Yes we understand the problem.'"

Hoyt disagreed, insisting that the advisory committee had accomplished a great deal.

“You’ve held six county meetings and engaged the public on an issue that most didn’t even have on their radar,” she said. “You also said that we need a system that provides representation to incorporated cities, either by elected officials or a mix of appointed and electeds. You’ve decided that representation is very important, a complex mix of population, geography and diversity; a fluid structure that is durable.”

Mathews thanked the advisory committee members for their work and dismissed them. She encouraged them to attend the next Transportation Commission meeting 2 p.m. Dec. 3 in Building C at the county Government Center in Placerville. Hoyt will present their findings then.

“It was the best we could do,” said committee member Raeann Jones, afterward. “In our first three meetings we had something like 10 people show up, total.”

Jones said she’d hoped to see a recommendation to reform the commission makeup, but quickly realized that “We were never going to reach consensus. It wasn’t until after the big El Dorado Hills meeting that this group admitted there was any problem at all.”

Assemblywoman Huber, who’d previously suggested a “four and one” model, which would provide one seat for each western slope supervisorial district, plus one for each incorporated city, reacted to the committee’s deliberation in a prepared statement.

“From the beginning, it has been my intention to ensure the El Dorado County Transportation Commission fairly represents the entire county- one important conclusion was reached by the Citizens Advisory Committee - the current structure of the commission is flawed. It is unfortunate that the committee wasn’t given more time to develop specific suggestions for altering the commission, because I think the time the members spent listening to the county residents gives them a unique perspective. I look forward to seeing the full proposal put forward on Dec. 3 and working with the commission on next legislative steps.”

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