

SUPPORTERS WANT NEW LAW TO CURTAIL CONSTRUCTION IN THE FACE OF CONGESTED TRAFFIC

Measure Y supporters are crafting language for a new ballot initiative to strengthen the original measure, which prohibits approvals for housing developments that would cause or increase congested traffic.

The group expects to submit the ballot language to the Secretary of State by the end of the year and begin gathering signatures soon after.

Measure Y, approved by 61 percent of voters in 1998 and extended for 10 years in 2008, restricts new development based on the traffic it would generate. Specifically, the measure forbids the approval of subdivisions of five or more parcels if the development would create or worsen gridlocked traffic on any road in the unincorporated county. Gridlock is classified by Caltrans as level of service F. Level of service A is free-flowing.

Measure Y also requires voters to approve any proposed expansion of roads already experiencing gridlock and developers to wholly fund the improvements needed to prevent their projects from increasing traffic on heavily used roads.

The rub, said Bill Center, a leading Measure Y proponent, is that developments are being approved, or not, after applicants have spent up to millions of dollars in the application phase. And a 4-1 Board of Supervisors vote could override Measure Y.

That stipulation was included, Center said, to give the board flexibility to approve traffic-generating projects that bring in jobs. "We believe the focus should be on jobs and not on housing," he said.

Two large subdivisions prominent in the Measure Y group's sights are Parker Development's 2,340-acre Marble Valley and the Gallo family's 740-acre Lime Rock Valley. The contiguous parcels, south of Highway 50 at Bass Lake Road, are mixed-use with schools, parks, shops and transportation. As proposed, they contain more than 4,000 homes. The county has not approved a specific plan for either project.

Center said he doesn't "see any way those developments could be approved under the existing set of laws. ... We're saying it's time to take a whole new look at this."

The burden of finding ways to mitigate traffic is on the developers, said David Defanti, assistant director of the county community development agency. Before

housing projects can be approved, applicants “must prove (in their environmental impact reports) they can mitigate traffic as required per Measure Y.”

Kirk Bone, director of government relations for Parker, said his company will complete the traffic study for Marble Valley in December, but the document won't be released to the public until the full EIR is ready, expected early next year. The review and approval process will include public hearings, he said.

Bone had no information on what the traffic study might look like, but he did say it will propose mitigation “if necessary.”

“It won't be approved if we don't comply with all the rules and regulations of land use in El Dorado County,” he said. “It has to comply with Measure Y.”

At a presentation to the Board of Supervisors Aug. 26, Center cited Caltrans data he said showed Highway 50 is already at level F during morning commute hours between the Sacramento County line and Cameron Park Drive.

“We've worked hard to build road capacity to avoid level of service F,” he said. “We're not interested in giving that capacity away to new development.”

Both Caltrans and the county acknowledge there is morning gridlock – westbound only – but both cited current projects that could relieve some congestion.

One solution that isn't on the table is widening Highway 50. Caltrans' Steve Nelson, the agency's public information officer for El Dorado County, confirmed there are no plans to expand the road.

However, two projects on Highway 50 – one completed, one nearly ready – might make mitigation easier or even unnecessary, according to Defanti and Nelson.

Caltrans recently opened high-occupancy vehicle lanes in both directions between El Dorado Hills Boulevard and Bass Lake Road. HOV lanes are restricted during morning and evening commutes to vehicles carrying two or more people or to certain alternative-fuel cars.

The new three-mile stretch connects with Sacramento County's HOV lanes from the county line to Watt Avenue for 23 continuous HOV miles, Nelson said. HOV lanes do reduce peak-hour congestion, he said.

The second Highway 50 project is the new interchange at El Dorado Hills Boulevard, expected to be completed by early 2014. When it is, onramp metering will control traffic flow onto the freeway. “That may well resolve the level of

service issue,” Defanti said.

Center isn’t optimistic. The purpose of metering, he said, “is so you don’t get glugs of traffic onto freeways. ... A metering light can’t keep 1,000 cars off the road.”

It isn’t only Highway 50 that experiences pokey traffic; congestion occurs on other roads as well. The county is studying future traffic patterns based on several potential growth scenarios and will release their findings in early 2014, Defanti said. Then, he said, “we’ll know the traffic impacts.”

The public will be invited to weigh in on the results. “Stay tuned,” Defanti said. “We’re definitely encouraging folks to be part of this discussion.”

Nevertheless, Center remains unconvinced the area’s roads could ever accommodate buildout of the parcels already in the pipeline. “I don’t get how they plan to get there,” he said. “I don’t want to see it done by smoke and mirrors.”