

Caltrans Officials Admonish County For Lack of Road Planning

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Obviously and visibly frustrated, Caltrans officials bluntly told Planning Commissioners on April 5 that all developments being approved by the county are impacting the highways and Caltrans has no money to improve roads.

Of specific concern was the rapid growth taking place along Highway 26. District 10 Permit Engineer John Gagliano told Commissioners that he is “really concerned about what’s happening.” He said Caltrans is seeing more and more development front on the highway and the roads will soon no longer have the ability to carry the increased traffic load. “We’re concerned and you ought to be concerned,” he declared.

Another Caltrans representative Gene Coleman displayed some maps to illustrate the problems caused by approving developments with small lots fronting o Highway 26. Even 40 acre and large parcels fronting the highway will eventually become a problem because these lots can be broken down again and again into smaller parcels.

Gagliano explained that the county is approving subdivisions on the highway without requiring dedication of right of way and this will “create a helluva lot of congestion when built out.” He said, “I can tell you Caltrans is doing no planning” because there is no money to purchase right of way. Besides, Caltrans has taken the attitude that the county can take care of the problem because they are allowing the development to occur. He added, “the problem you are creating—you’ll live with.”

He stressed that someone needs to analyze the future impacts and plan facilities to take care of the traffic. He pointed out that road improvements take a long time in coming to fruition and mentioned that Oakdale and Livingstone bypasses still haven’t been built after 25 years.

Bob Ikeda, Assistant Chief Traffic Engineer, was critical of the county for failing to notify Caltrans on rezoning applications and commercial development.

Planning Director Danny Mao promptly replied, “that’s not true.” He noted that all rezoning applications go to various agencies, including Caltrans. However, if property is already zoned commercial or industrial, then no notice is sent.

Ikeda said that no other county operates this way and intimated that Calaveras is the only county that doesn’t cooperate.

Mao explained that property already zoned needs nothing but a building permit which is why Caltrans is not advised. If the property accesses onto the highway, then the owner must apply for a Caltrans encroachment permit. He suggested that Caltrans submit a plan and the Planning Department will then advise applicants of Caltrans requirements.

Ikedda differed with Mao, stating that developers take advantage of the situation.

Mao insisted the county is doing nothing different from any other county. On rezoning and use permits, the county is required, by law, to notify Caltrans and other affected agencies which have 21 days to respond. After 21 days the county is not obligated to accept the recommendations (and this has occurred in some instances).

Gagliano predicts that Highway 26 will soon become like East Sonora which has so many accesses and so much traffic that no one can enter the highway. He emphasized, "if you don't act, it's going to be too late."

Planning Commission Chairman Rosemary Faulkner explained that the county requires dedication of rights of way and setbacks for county roads, but there are no such guidelines from Caltrans and the Commission has no jurisdiction to require right of way for state highway absent such criteria.

Gagliano stressed, "You have to start talking to us more." He admitted cooperation has been much better in the last year, but there is still a need for improvement in communications. He explained that Caltrans has developed a Precise Plan for Highway 26, but the county has taken no action to adopt the plan and now Gold Creek Estates has been reactivated which is posing another problem. He added, "the inaction is causing problems."

The precise Plan, released last spring, involves setting right of way boundaries, as appropriate, to aid the county in protecting right of way for widening Highway 26 from two lanes and realigning the existing route to meet present day highway standards.

The Plan was initiated in response to substantial planned development to provide for appropriate setback distances. The Plan consists of two alternatives which differ from each other only at the easternmost end where Highway 26 ties into Route 12. Caltrans and county staff met in May, 1989, and all involved approved of the alternatives as approved and recommended that development of both alternatives continue.

Caltrans staff finalized the geometrics in early July and presented final layouts to county staff on July 14. It was decided that the county would pursue the selection and approval of an alternative through their own processes.

Mao recalled that Public Works Director Ted Pederson had some concerns about the width of right of way which Caltrans proposed. He believes Pederson sent a letter to Caltrans relative to those concerns; however, there has been no agreement on the best alignment.

Marty Price of Public Works explained that there is a conflict between private rights and public needs which needs to be resolved. He considered it “unfortunate” that a stalemate exists and agreed that both parties need to exert more effort to work together to resolve these issues which will make the Commission’s job easier.

District 3 Commissioner Dick Stites inquired about the status of the request of Caltrans, regarding Thousand Hills, that no approval be given which adds to the traffic volume until certain provisions are made to mitigate the increased traffic. He also queried how provisions can be made to ensure that roads, impacted by development, will be improved.

Ikeda replied, “by working together.”

Mao reported that consultants are presently preparing an environmental impact report and have hired very competent traffic engineers to perform the studies and analysis. He did not, however, know the status of the project at this time.

Mao suggested that the textbook principle be applied in the real world. Ideally, he said, Caltrans could design highways with the necessary right of way and notify the county of the recommendations. The county could then inform developers, in approving maps, that no building can take place within the right of way. They could request frontage roads parallel with the highway with accesses every half mile or mile. He concurred that the county doesn’t want Highway 26 like a street. However, until Caltrans develops some policies or standards, the county legally can’t tie up property.

Faulkner repeated that the Commission does not have jurisdiction over state highways.

Gagliano explained that once development is approved, Caltrans must allow access to each parcel which will eventually entail significant cross traffic. He noted that the Precise Plan calls for eight foot shoulders which he doesn’t believe are adequate for the future. The county has contended that 80 to 100 feet of right of way is too wide but Gagliano speculated that it may not be wide enough in the future in light of Mao’s concept of parallel roads.

Gagliano informed the Commission that Stockton’s plan was just released and they contend that eight lanes on Interstate 5 and Highway 99 are not enough while this county is saying 100 feet is too much.

District 1 commissioner Frank Wibiral threw the ball back at Caltrans by asking how long the state has been working on the matter; when Caltrans expects to answer the county’s letter and whether a schedule for meeting has been set.

Gatgaliano explained that the county is saying the state wants too much right of way and the state is saying they think more is needed.

Wibiral replied, “let’s not think, let’s do, let’s get together” and he asked “are we going to set a meeting?”

Ikeda noted that Pederson was meeting with Caltrans engineers that day.

Gagliano explained that the issue cannot be resolved until such time as the county determines that amount of traffic at buildout.

Wibiral took exception to the state insinuating that the county has become stagnant. In his opinion, he was hearing the state saying they were washing their hands and putting it totally in the county’s lap. He suggested that maybe the county and state should get politicians involved to obtain more funding.

Gagliano agreed that the political arena might be the best solution to the problems. He said the state used to put in highway systems to support traffic but that has changed. He added, “If I didn’t care, I wouldn’t be here.” He also advised the Commission that the ballot measure to raise the gas tax nine cents will not benefit Highway 26 at all as the routes it will fund have already been named.

District 4 Commissioner Dick Barger implied that the state might have more funds if there was better management. He was critical of Caltrans sending eight guys and a pickup to patch the road while only one guy works and the other seven lean on a shovel.

Gagliano suggested that he contact the local superintendent when he sees incidents of this nature.

Explaining that she was not being critical, Faulkner said she didn’t understand how the situation at La Contenta was allowed to happen. There’s a commercial complex and nursery on one side and shopping center across the street and now Gold Creek Estates and yet no left turn pocket was required. She asked, “was it our fault or your fault?”

Gagliano said the state was upset over this but the real estate office circumvented Caltrans by using a side street for access. He said the county was notified that this type of thing was not helping the situation and ends up causing serious problems but it was approved.

Mao explained that if traffic uses the main highway for access then a Caltrans encroachment is required but not when access is from a county road.

Ikeda stated that any project that impacts the highway should require a left turn lane whether or not access is directly from a county road.

A committee, composed of Stites and Wibiral, was set up to meet with Caltrans.