

# **ST Chamber speaks out on 2011 Hwy. 50 closure**

## **South Tahoe Chamber of Commerce Position Paper 2011 Echo Summit Repair**

### **ISSUE**

The rock wall at Echo Summit on Hwy. 50 was installed after WWII and needs to be repaired. Caltrans has proposed five options for this project, anticipated to begin May 1, 2011. The consequences of this repair work will be traffic delays and rerouting, which could significantly impact the local economy.

### **BACKGROUND**

CalTrans started a public awareness campaign early in 2009, holding forums with the Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority, Lake Tahoe Chamber of Commerce South Shore, the City of South Lake Tahoe, El Dorado County Supervisors, and others. Caltrans proposed five options, but recommends Option 5, which calls for a forty-four day project, commencing May 1, 2011. Under this option, Echo Summit would be closed for 18 to 24 days, with 20 or more additional days of delays with pilot cars. Further, traffic into and out of South Lake Tahoe would be rerouted from Placerville, CA, onto Hwys 49 and 88, and through Jackson, CA. Johnson Pass Road would be open only for local and emergency vehicles. LTVA, LTCCSS, and others have publicly supported Option 5. There is an advertising budget of \$750,000. designated to offset the economic impact to South Lake Tahoe.

### **DISCUSSION**

The South Tahoe Chamber of Commerce (STCC) first became aware of the CalTrans public forum in May of 2009. Concerned that

alternative roadwork projects may provide less impact upon the local economy, STCC gave presentations throughout the county to educate a larger segment of the business community about the proposed CalTrans project, and to seek additional public feedback. The essence of the public poll has shown that most, but not all, respondents (95% or more) had heard of the Echo Summit repair project, but did not know when it would occur or that there were 5 options connected with the project.

Following each lecture and utilizing discussions via telephone/Internet, STCC provided business community respondents a choice:

- 1.) Full closure of Echo Summit for 18 to 24 days in a single construction season (May to October) for a 44-day project
- 2.) Partial closure over two construction seasons, with a pilot vehicle guiding vehicles across the summit.

Interestingly, respondents were basically split 50/50 on these two options. However, most all (98%+) respondents sought to have Johnson Pass Road open to all small passenger vehicles, and commercial vehicles routed through Hwy. 88. Many respondents (especially those who had experienced closures of Hwy 50 in 1992 for the Cleveland Fire and the mudslide in 1997) wanted access to Sly Park/Iron Mountain Road, and desire Hwy 50 remain open for passengers and larger vehicles.

The results of STCC's lectures and public polls were presented to Caltrans at an STCC sponsored public forum on August 20, 2009. During this meeting, Tom Brannon, CalTrans Chief Officer of Project Management B, explained the construction process and their rationale behind Caltrans's decision to proceed with their proposed construction Option 5 decisions (full closure over a single construction season). Mr. Brannon related that although Johnson Pass Road would be available for local traffic under all five of their construction plan options, Caltrans has at least six reasons why they are opposed to

encouraging, promoting, or advertising use of Johnson Pass Road to the general public (i.e., tourists, delivery vehicles). These reasons all relate to Johnson Pass Road itself and include:

1. Liability issues to Cal Trans – lawsuits
2. Granite sub-surface of the road
3. Absence of safety guards on this narrow road
4. Two very sharp turns (30-foot radius and 35-foot radius)
5. Very steep grade
6. An estimated \$100,000 cost to prepare for 18 to 24 days of high traffic volume over this road, plus expenditures to repair damages resulting from overuse of Johnson Pass Road.

During the same public forum, the possibility for using Sly Park Road/Iron Mountain Road was reviewed. This road is maintained by the US Forest Service and is normally open as a public thoroughfare only after the snow is melted and the road is dry. The primary issues cited by Caltrans for their opposition to using this route were:

1. Liability issues to Cal Trans – lawsuits
2. Road bed is normally very wet in May and water is under the sub-surface
3. It is a USFS road which lacks police patrols or other services for approximately 30 miles
4. Road is narrow
5. Unknown cost to prepare for 24-days of high traffic volume damage and subsequent repair
6. Danger of forest fire if the project was moved from May to October (we have subsequently verified with Captains Gigliotti

and Michaels that our fire season is July and August).

To the issue of full closure of Echo Summit for 18 to 24 days during one construction season or partial closure with a pilot vehicle for two construction seasons (May to October), respondents were split almost 50/50. This question was difficult for most respondents to answer because there are no economic impact studies to review. However, historical data provides evidence of economic loss of \$1 million dollars per day to the south shore during closure of Hwy 50. Further, STTC spoke with local accountants who have reported that our economy is better equipped to weather a Hwy 50 road closure in October than in May.

Regardless of the options provided by Caltrans, there is overwhelming support to maximize the ease of traffic flow to visitors during the construction project by using both Johnson Pass and Sly Park Road/Iron Mountain Road. The most desired route (98%+) is to have Johnson Pass Road open for passenger vehicles, and Sly Park Road/Iron Mountain Road open for passengers and commercial vehicles. If Johnson Pass Road is unavailable, then the desired route is Sly Park Road/Iron Mountain Road open to all traffic. Conversely, the overwhelming least desired choice is to divert south shore visitors through Highway 88.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

STCC's position is based upon its own research, discussions with Caltrans, and STCC's informal data collection using polling at lectures, phone calls, and internet contact. The recommendations are as follows:

1. Use part of the advertising money to upgrade Johnson Pass Road for passenger vehicles with the above recommendations. Commercial vehicles will use Highway 88.
2. Even though there is a strong voice in the community for partial closure (approximately 50-50) there is not enough

strong evidence to indicate a firm stance for either position.

If approved by the safety professionals (fire, ambulance and police), then select Option 5 and close Hwy 50 at Echo Summit for 18 to 24 days and 20 days of pilot vehicles for repair.

3. Move the project construction from May to October. According to local fire authority, any given year, the danger of fire is similar in May to the danger in October. This already represents a shoulder season where many accountants felt the financial impact to businesses would be less than in May and June. In October, Iron Mountain road would be dry after the summer and less susceptible to crumbling and damage in October vs May.

4. Create events to entice guests to use businesses from Meyers to Stateline during closure.

#### **ADDITIONAL ISSUES / SUGGESTIONS**

Construction Costs: During the poll, the question of differences in the cost of construction for each CalTrans option arose, however, STCC was not in a position to answer this question on Caltran's behalf. It was, however, suggested that night work be part of the process.

Advertising Budget Feedback: With respect to Caltran's \$750,000 advertising budget, creative suggestions included Caltrans purchase of liability insurance to cover lawsuits which may arise from use of Johnson Pass Road. Another suggestion was to not advertise the construction project, and use the advertising money instead to open Sly Park Road/Iron Mountain Road and improve the safety of Johnson Pass Road. Advise commercial vehicles not to use Johnson Pass Road.

Media: We continue to have concerns about how the recent Bay Bridge closure media was handled. Most Californians saw the front page news and TV lead stories saying "not to go there" even though the San Francisco businesses were trying to cover

overhead.

Hwy 88 Advertisement: Suggestions for the \$750,000 advertising budget for Hwy 88 diversion: Advertise Hwy 88 as a scenic route. Develop new events on the south shore to attract visitors. Advertise each south shore community Meyers, Y, Al Tahoe, Bijou, Ski Run and Stateline equally. Target high discretionary income market and provide an event that would draw them to Tahoe.

Pilot Car Use: Suggestions for rerouting over Johnson Pass Road for 18 to 24 days: Use a pilot vehicle for both directions on Johnson Pass Road. Use portable traffic signals and pilot vehicles going east and west throughout the week with only eastbound traffic Friday night and Saturday morning switching to westbound only traffic on Sunday. Restrict commercial vehicles to travel between 11pm and 5am.