

South Shore fighting Caltrans' Echo Summit closure date

By Kathryn Reed

South Shore officials are fighting Caltrans' decision to close Echo Summit four days before the largest professional cycling event in North America starts in Stateline.



State Sen. Ted Gaines, R-Roseville, has stepped into the fray – again. He has arranged for a conference call for Monday with local officials and Caltrans District 3 Director Jody Jones.

“Shock is the word being used. This totally caught people by surprise. There wasn't even a phone call. Just a press release went out and that's that,” said Steve Teshara, chairman of the South Shore Transportation Management Association.

This agency that has been in existence since 1994 is taking the lead on changing the start date for the closure. Teshara said anytime after May 15 would be acceptable.

The California Department of Transportation announced April 29 that starting May 11 Highway 50 over Echo Summit would be closed for two weeks to replace the dilapidated rock wall. This route is the main artery between the South Shore and points west.

With about 35,000 spectators expected at the start for the Amgen Tour de California, many would presumably be coming over Echo Summit.

Although there are alternative routes to get to South Lake Tahoe, what has South Shore tourism officials worried is people will skip their end of the lake and instead opt to be

on the North Shore. Northstar is where the first leg ends and Squaw Valley is where Day 2 starts.

While the Echo Summit project has been talked about for years and for more than a month people knew it could start any time after May 1, Caltrans gave no reason why May 11 was picked.

Caltrans officials were not available for comment Friday.

The criteria had been the need for a window of 10 straight days of clear weather. The contractor also faces penalties if the full closure extends into June. Plus, the road will be open during Memorial Day weekend.

May is traditionally an iffy weather month in Lake Tahoe, with 2010 full of snowy days.

Tourism officials have already had to deflect misinformation that has been published. The May-June issue of *Via* magazine wrongly stated Echo Summit would be closed through June. The reality is after the two week closure, it will be subject to controlled traffic for up to six weeks. Construction will end at noon on Fridays and the road completely open Memorial Day – and if work is still going on, Fourth of July.

“With respect to this project, the community has been continuously misled. They said they understood how important Amgen is and it doesn’t seem important at all,” Teshara said of Caltrans.

Teshara once was an advocate for the Echo Summit project starting in May. He wrote a letter to Caltrans saying as much. But this was before the region knew it would be hosting multiple stages of the bike race.

At a March 9 meeting with Gaines, Caltrans, Sierra-at-Tahoe General Manager John Rice, Andrew Strain of Heavenly Mountain Resort, B Gorman with Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce, reps from contractor C.C. Myers, South Tahoe

Councilman Tom Davis, and South Tahoe staff member Nancy Kerry, it was revealed Caltrans picked May based on Teshara's letter. They thought he was speaking for the basin, even though at the time he was speaking on behalf of the North Shore – which is a likely beneficiary of an Echo Summit closure.

Caltrans, according to people at the meeting, did not ask for other input. But Amgen announced in February how the Tahoe area would be part of this year's race, so Caltrans has had time to adjust any internal time line it may have had.

While May is a traditionally slow time throughout the Lake Tahoe Basin, it has been well documented events literally drive people to the basin. That was an impetus for striving to be part of Tour de California.

What worries South Shore officials is Caltrans' decision to close Echo Summit pre-Amgen will drive them elsewhere.