

Hwy. 50 speed limit changes anger South Shore residents

By Kathryn Reed

“Fifty on 50” has long been the joke about the speed locals drive on the main thoroughfare through the South Shore. Only it’s not a joke anymore. And the actual speed limit from Meyers to Stateline is 55 mph where it’s one lane in each direction and 65 mph where it’s two lanes in each direction.

This is because Caltrans conducted traffic and engineering studies that found people are already safely driving faster than the posted limit. Until the new limit signs are in place, the current speed limit signs are not enforceable per state law. Instead, the law becomes what is normal for state highways based on the number of lanes – thus the 55 and 65 mile per hour limits.

When the signs go in – which is expected within two months – the speed limit on this nearly 10-mile stretch of highway will be 5 mph higher than what it is now posted. So, it will be 45 mph in Meyers, 55 from Country Club Drive to just past Lake Tahoe Airport where it will switch to 45 at Kyburz Road, then a quarter mile farther east it will switch to 40 mph and will remain that limit through South Lake Tahoe.



Speed limit
signs don't
mean a thing

right now on
the California
side of the
South Shore.
Photo/LTN

Anyone who has gotten a ticket since December for speeding should be able to successfully win in court.

CHP officers have not been enforcing the posted limit signs since December when they were notified by Caltrans officials of the survey results.

“We haven’t noticed any changes yet,” California Highway Patrol Officer Jeff Gartner told *Lake Tahoe News* in regard to drivers altering their speed through the South Shore. This means they are going the posted limit.

State transportation officials were in town Feb. 21 for two meetings to discuss the issue with officials and residents. The first session was before the South Lake Tahoe City Council; the evening session was at Lake Valley fire station in Meyers.

Pat Kelley, an engineer with Caltrans, told those at both meetings, “There must be a legal reason not to raise the speed limit.”

But she could never cite a legal reason despite being asked to do so at both meetings. People at both meetings were clearly frustrated in wondering what the point of the gatherings were when Caltrans was going to raise the speed limit despite all of the objections from those in attendance.

People in Meyers questioned whether the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency could launch a legal fight by saying the increase in speed increases emissions and increases sediment reaching the lake.

Later in the meeting, TRPA spokeswoman Kristi Boosman said, "The major focus of the Regional Plan update is livable, walkable town centers. This flies in the face of that."

She also mentioned air quality concerns.

Of the seven people who spoke at the council meeting, all were against raising the speed limit. Of the more than 50 people at the Meyers meeting, no one spoke in favor of upping the limit.

When El Dorado County Supervisor Norma Santiago said she thought the speed through Meyers should be reduced to 35 mph, it was met with applause.

What the council wants to do is change the state Vehicle Code that uses a one-size-fits-all approach to setting speed limits on California highways. Mayor Claire Fortier will write a letter to Caltrans as well as to state lawmakers to work on changing the law.

State law was changed in 2009 to parallel federal law that in the end stripped Caltrans of its ability to lower speed limits based on criteria that would consider specific needs of a community.

Today the law does not take into consideration that the state highway goes through a town, the number of stoplights, the number of driveways, that people are walking in the highway (especially in winter) because this area is so deficient on sidewalks, or the fluctuations in traffic based on Tahoe being a tourist community.

Santiago at the night meeting also expressed how the law doesn't consider the character of a community, the fact that schoolchildren are crossing a state highway with no marked crosswalk, and that cyclists share the road in so many areas where no path is available – just the lane of traffic.

For locals, Highway 50 is more like a city street and not a

state highway. After all, much of it is called Lake Tahoe Boulevard or Emerald Bay Road. But for Caltrans, it only sees the highway designation.

Kelley said the surveys were taken in dry conditions, in the middle of the week, and during the off-season (for the city).

The council wants Caltrans to count cars and their speed midweek during peak summer season.

As Councilman Hal Cole put it, he believes the statistics are skewed in favor of raising the speed limit, and that a compromise of the varying conditions needs to be considered.

Pete Fink, an avid cyclist, said, "We are trying to increase the recreation aspect of this town. Increasing the speed limit is diametrically opposite of that."

Many said how the South Shore is trying to be more pedestrian and bicycle friendly, and that making it a more scary endeavor to walk or bike through town because of vehicles racing by even faster will thwart any progress that has been achieved and unhinge future improvements.

In the end, Kelley said she would take the council's concerns back to her legal department to see if the current limits could remain. She also said Caltrans could conduct another survey one day this summer.

The Meyers area also wants another survey because people don't believe the three April 2009 dates and July 2 that year reflect a true representation of traffic. They want more locals and fewer tourists to be counted. Caltrans did not agree to do this.

What Caltrans studies are prevailing speeds, accident data and conditions not readily apparent to a driver. The minimum number of vehicles counted is 100 at each location. These studies are supposed to be done every seven years. But it's

been 10 years since the South Shore was last studied. Why the delay? Kelley deferred the question to a spokeswoman for the agency who could not answer the question.

In South Tahoe, 13.3 million vehicles traveled through town in a three-year period. Four collisions involving eight vehicles occurred in that time, according to Caltrans.

In Meyers, 8.3 million vehicles went through the area in three years, with 37 accidents involving 74 vehicles. Twenty-seven of those accidents occurred between Friday and Sunday, according to Caltrans.

Highway officials say the accident rate on the South Shore is extremely low for the number of vehicles using the state highway.

Stats, according to Caltrans, show the accident rate does not rise as the speed limit increases.

Another trigger for Caltrans to reconsider speed limits is if changes have been made to the area that would affect how people drive. For South Lake Tahoe, the curb-gutter-sidewalk project that should be completed this summer should necessitate another traffic study in spring 2013.

For Meyers, nothing is on the books today that would necessitate another study.

While some time was spent on how best to cross the highway in Meyers, residents scoffed when told a striped crosswalk is more dangerous than not having one. Caltrans said it gives people a false sense of security. Residents are looking for security and believe no designated area to cross is more dangerous.

A roundabout was talked about, but the discussion was lost among the speed limit dialog.

For today, the speed limits from Meyers to Stateline on

Highway 50 are either 55 or 65 mph.

Because of that, South Lake Tahoe Police Chief Brian Uhler wants the new limit signs – even though they increase the current posted limits – put up ASAP so the speed laws are more reasonable. He said those signs could always revert back to the lower speeds if Caltrans can be convinced raising the speed limit is not logical.