

Loop road opponents dominate SLT council meeting

By Kathryn Reed

If the loop road project were completed, will a section of South Lake Tahoe become a ghost town as drivers avoid a significant commercial segment of town, or will it stimulate the economy?

If Highway 50 and city streets in the Stateline area were left as they are, will this be good or bad for the city financially?

Plenty of people have an array of opinions, but no hard facts have come forward to put substance to their thoughts.

On Tuesday night the South Lake Tahoe City Council got an earful about what people think about the proposal that would eliminate 88 dwellings where 245 people live. Thirteen businesses would be affected in some way. "Affected" has yet to be defined. No residents or businesses in Nevada would be relocated.

All of this would be so traffic on Highway 50 would be rerouted through a neighborhood on the mountain side behind Harrah's and MontBleu, with the idea it would provide a more walkable, scenic area in the Heavenly Village-casino corridor areas.



Businesses in South Lake Tahoe are making it known how they feel about the loop road. Photo/LTN

The May 29 evening workshop was intended to give the public an opportunity to weigh-in with their thoughts about this project that is being driven by the Tahoe Transportation District – not the city, not Douglas County, and neither state transportation agency.

More than 50 people attended the meeting.

What was not pointed out is TTD can go forward with the project, even if the council never gives its blessing, as long as eminent domain is not required.

Of the 26 people who spoke, five were in favor of the project, 13 against and eight were not definitive in their stance. However, of those eight, more were critical than supportive.

Eleven letters were submitted, though not read into the record despite the writers asking for that to happen. All were against the project.

Bill Cherry, an attorney representing a business owner in the project area, handed the council members a petition with 106 signatures from business people who are against the loop road.

Terry Hackett, who is the controlling partner of the Village Center, said he has yet to formulate an opinion.

"We'll review the economic impacts," Hackett told the council.

But no one has commissioned a thorough economic analysis.

The environmental documents that will be prepared for the loop road will include an economic component, but not a substantive one that addresses some real concerns the city would have. This is because the loop road is a transportation project, not an economic stimulus project.

The South Shore Vision Plan, the proposal that would revamp the highway from Ski Run Boulevard to Kahle Drive, does have an economic feasibility component. Carl Ribaud with SMG Marketing is putting that study together. He is also one of the people who spoke at the special council meeting in favor of the loop road.

However, the impacts to businesses in the loop road area that would not be demolished and/or relocated are not being studied. This was part of Hackett's point.

If the road were rerouted, people would go behind his shopping center where there is no signage. He added had a loop road been proposed in 1980 when he bought what was then known as the Crescent V Center, he would not have done so.

Pete MacRoberts, who operates the Holiday Inn Express, said there is no way guests can merely use the Carrows driveway.

Randy Vogelgesang, South Tahoe Public Utility District's board liaison to the city, said, "A lot of time infrastructure is relocated at our expense and that is passed on to ratepayers."

How other utilities – like gas, electric, telephone and cable – would be affected and the residual impacts on ratepayers has not been brought forward to the public.

The council never intended to take action Tuesday. But most have strong feelings.

"I don't support using eminent domain again," Councilman Hal Cole said.

People intimately familiar with eminent domain spoke – like Lou Pierini who went through it with other redevelopment projects.

"Of the 100 businesses displaced, I'm the only one left," he told the council.

"I think the council needs to make a decision early," Councilman Bruce Grego said. He wants the council to take a vote in the fall before the process is dragged out any longer and more money is spent.

Tahoe Transportation District has money to get through the design process – of which 10 percent is done. It's estimated the project could cost \$70 million to build – of which about half is projected to be spent on acquisition and relocation of property and people. However, not a penny of that money has been secured.

A relocation plan is expected to be released any day. Comments on it will be taken for 30 days. If the project goes forward, rights of ways and relocation could begin in 2014.

Councilwoman Angela Swanson said, "To me this is a huge land use piece for the city. We need to see if it pencil's out." She wants to look at the broad vision of the city instead of viewing the loop road as an isolated project.

Paul Genasci, whose office is not in the project area, said, "This town does not just exist in the casino corridor." He said complaints from tourists are about blight, not the congestion in the casino corridor. He questions if tourists have been asked what they think since the project appears geared to improving the tourist experience.

Dominic Acolino, general manager for Embassy Suites, said his

guests are frustrated with the infrastructure on the South Shore. He mentioned how he suggests they go to Van Sickle Bi-State Park, but warns them to be careful because there are no sidewalks.

What he failed to mention is if the loop road project he supports goes through, a state highway will go in front of the only bi-state park in the country.

Jay Kniep believes the environmental gains touted from the project could be achieved without rerouting the road, just like they were with the Heavenly Village project. He also questions the old studies being used that call for an increase in traffic on the highway when in fact the reality is fewer vehicles are on the road.

The draft environmental documents are expected to be released this fall. The soonest construction could begin is 2016.