

# Sides being taken in South Shore loop road project

By Kathryn Reed

Driving down Fern Road it's one of those typical South Lake Tahoe streets with a variety of housing options. Apartments are at the east end, various size single-family residences closer to Highway 50 – including a fairly decent size dwelling. Sprinklers are going, gardens starting to sprout. Kids toys are out and about.

It's a neighborhood.

If planners have their way, it will be a state highway.

From the cul de sac at Fern is a paved path to the corner of Highway 50 and Pioneer Trail. There sit a variety of businesses – liquor store, sushi restaurant, pizza and ski shop. Places locals go to as well as tourists.

The owners and operators are in a prime location. They wonder where an equal parcel with the same foot and vehicle traffic could be found in town if planners relocate them.

Across the highway is the Holiday Inn Express. Access to that hotel will be dramatically affected if the proposed loop road goes in.

There is already a loop road behind the four main Stateline casinos. But the bulk of traffic stays on the straight thoroughfare through the casino corridor.

Tahoe Transportation District is the lead agency plotting a course that would widen the route behind Harrah's Lake Tahoe and MontBleu because it would be a state highway. On the California side it will eliminate 88 dwellings where 245 people live. Thirteen businesses would be affected in some

way. "Affected" was not defined at the May 11 TTD board meeting.



A house on one end of Fern Road.



Housing on the other end of Fern Road that would be wiped out if the Loop Road goes through.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

The route would in some ways follow the back way locals go to avoid the casino area.

Highway 50 through the tourist corridor would become a city street on both sides of the state line.

While an underpass and overpass were talked about in the planning stages of the would-be convention center to link that

site with Heavenly Village, Caltrans approval was never secured. If the loop road project goes forward, then it would be South Lake Tahoe that would have the say regarding an underpass-overpass.

Environmental gain is touted as a reason to do the loop road, but the reality is the project has always been about creating a better atmosphere for people walking in the area. So, better for tourists and the businesses that service tourists in the Stateline area.



Businesses that would be affected if the highway is rerouted.

But with a road still dividing the casino properties, it won't be all that pedestrian friendly.

Gone, though, would be the through truck traffic.

This project is also tied to the South Shore Vision Plan – a public-private revitalization project that would overhaul the area from Ski Run Boulevard in South Lake Tahoe to Kahle Drive in Stateline.

Of the 13 members of the public who spoke, seven voiced support for the project, five were against and one asked questions.

Angie Watson, who owns apartments on Fern Road, said she

wasn't surprised to hear her tenants liked the idea of a \$12,000 cash payment that has been talked about.

"I have a lot to lose," she told the TTD board during the meeting at Embassy Suites. "I don't understand how the loop road will bring business. Is it for the 2½ months we have good weather?"

Fern Road parallels the backside of the formerly named Crescent V Center. Nearby streets that would be affected are full of people who walk to work.

Shawn Kearney, owner of Tahoe Duck Tours, says she hears all the time from tourists about how pretty the area is, but the town looks like a dump.

"Relocating the highway is a chance to reinvent ourselves. It's not wise to rest on our laurels," Kearney said.

Few people disagree the South Shore as a whole is in need of upgrades to the way it looks. How that happens is the sticking point.

Inertia has partly set in because redevelopment projects like the loop road are talked about for decades so property owners don't want to make a substantial investment if they don't have the opportunity to get a return on that investment. Another reason is the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency has eliminated a true free market by making tourist accommodation units and commercial floor area commodities. TRPA has also been the spoke in the wheel of progress for converting dilapidated hotels into another use.

What the TTD board agreed to on Friday was to establish a citizen review committee and established a 30-day comment period for when the relocation plan is released. That is expected to be released to the public by the end of the month.

The South Lake Tahoe City Council is having a special meeting

May 29 from 6-8pm at Lake Tahoe Airport to discuss the loop road. The city has eminent domain powers, which means it could take a private entity's parcel for a project like this. However, a previous council on a 5-0 vote passed a resolution saying eminent domain cannot be used. That decision could be overturned if four council members agree to do so.

TTD staff said a series of meetings would be scheduled throughout the summer for people to learn more about specifics of the project, such as what happens from their meeting May 15 with the design consultants, and for staff to gather input from proponents and opponents.