

S. Tahoe council disagrees on eminent domain for loop road

By Kathryn Reed

Just as the South Lake Tahoe City Council appeared to be on the same page regarding how to approach the divisive loop road project, bickering and stubbornness took hold.



All five agree a letter needs to be written to the Tahoe Transportation District with strong language encouraging that bi-state agency to investigate more than one proposal for the loop road.

It is highly unusual for an environmental impact report or environmental impact study (both are being done) to delve into just one idea. While a preferred alternative is common, usually the document looks into more than one plan.

Not so when it comes to the loop road.

The project would reroute Highway 50 in South Lake Tahoe to go through standing businesses and residences in South Lake Tahoe, then behind Harrah's and MontBleu in Stateline.

Highway 50 from about where it intersects with Pioneer Trail on the north side of town would become a city street through the casino corridor.

Perhaps because the discussion started negatively June 19 with Mayor Claire Fortier wondering why the item was even on the agenda it should not have come as a surprise that Councilman Tom Davis would not budge on his motion.

The motion called for more alternatives to be studied, acknowledgement the current council would not use eminent

domain, and the request that an independent economic study be conducted.

The vote was 3-2 with Fortier and Councilwoman Angela Swanson in the minority. These two don't want to lock the city into saying no to eminent domain when it's possible an alternative for the loop road the council likes could require that taking of property.

Fortier and Swanson went so far as to say they will not sign the letter.

The juvenile banter returned at that point after what had been a fairly professional discussion. Davis said he might want to withdraw his name from letters he didn't agree with. Fortier said the issue will become a political point of contention in the November council race. (Bruce Grego and Hal Cole's seats are up.) Grego said maybe the voters should be asked to make the decision on the loop road. (He has clients with property in the area who could be affected if the current proposal goes through, but has yet to recuse himself from any of the discussions.)

Fourteen members of the public spoke at Tuesday's meeting before the bickering council members deliberated. Another 16 letters were part of the day's record, too.

The loop road will be on the July 3 agenda for the council to talk about commenting on the draft relocation plan. Comments will be due a week later.

City staff told the council that the document lacks specifics, especially when it comes to businesses, and really just meets the basic requirements of federal law. Still, the relocation of people and businesses are the main sticking points with locals, and is what's at the heart of the eminent domain discussion.

In the end, it really doesn't matter what the city says or

thinks, the TTD board – of which Swanson is a member – can do what it wants. That board is expected at its July 20 meeting to discuss looking at more alternatives. Swanson will be absent and her alternate, Grego, will be city's rep. However, TTD does not have eminent domain authority; the city and Caltrans do.