

# Ex-Caltrans engineer talks about Tahoe roads



Gene Abshier talks transportation.  
Photo/Kathryn Reed

**By Kathryn Reed**

If money weren't an issue, there would likely be a bridge over Emerald Bay today.

Caltrans spent decades studying the idea. It started with the desire by people to have an all-weather route on the West Shore. This is because for about 3½ months a year Highway 89 was closed because of snow.

It was in 1913 that a road was built on that side of the lake. It was 22 miles. At that time it took two days to drive from South Lake Tahoe to Tahoe City, according to Gene Abshier, an engineer in the Marysville Caltrans office for 36 years. Today he is a resident of South Lake Tahoe. Last week he gave a talk about the history of roads in Lake Tahoe.

Improvements to the roads continued until World War II when funding for these types of projects ceased.

It was after the war that California created the freeway and expressway systems. The state was divided in half, with the

northern end getting 40 percent of the funding. A caveat was that Caltrans had to spend a minimum of \$4 million in each county each year.

This is how in 1965 Highway 50 was widened from 22-foot lanes to 40 foot from Lake Tahoe Airport to 15th Street. It took about seven months to construct.

The 1955 Christmas Eve rockslide closed Highway 89 until the following November. That scar on the mountainside remains today.

In 1956 engineers came up with the idea of a suspension bridge more than 1,800 feet long as well as snow sheds more than 2,000 feet long that would go under the slide.

Each year that passed more alternatives were created until 28 were on the table. Seven included crossing Emerald Bay, snow sheds, viaducts, and three alignments through D.L. Bliss State Park were some of the ideas. Land owners, residents and others were nowhere near agreement on what the best route would be.

Abshier told his boss there was no way they could send Sacramento that many choices. He still has a copy of the report – which was whittled down to eight alternatives – that went to higher ups. It's more than an inch thick. This was pre-computers. Engineers wrote things and those in the typing pool took over from there.

"It was the thickest and most complex report out of our office," Abshier said. This was 1969.

With the importance of the document and the level of interest in it, extra copies were ordered – 200 total.

Abshier said 160 ended up in storage. Most of those were sent to a landfill.

There was no money for such an ambitious project. Times were also changing as people started to care more about the

environment.