

Opinion: Loop road promises are a farce

By Jerome Evans

The Tahoe Transportation District (TTD) has dressed up what has been known for years as the loop road project with terms such as “community revitalization”, “main street”, “gateway”, “walkability” and “affordable housing”, but it still makes no more sense than it did years ago. I believe it is time to separate fact from fantasy regarding this project.

Fantasy: The project is necessary to solve “the long-time problem of improving community traffic flow into and out of its most congested area... This was the original justification for the loop road when it was proposed back in the 1970s, and it appears to be the principal justification today (FAQ, TTD, not dated).

Fact: The most recent (2014) Caltrans data for traffic volume (average annual daily traffic or AADT) in this portion of Highway 50 indicate that traffic has declined by nearly 50 percent during the past two decades. And as early as 2007, “peak hour operations” were found to be “generally acceptable” (Project Study Report, p.9) The traffic congestion that may have once justified diversion no longer exists.

Traffic volume projections for 2035 produced by the project-engineering firm Wood Rogers Inc. in 2010 to justify the project – an increase of more than 90 percent – are without adequate explanation or plausibility. They do, however, serve the interests of the project engineer.

Fantasy: The project will convert Highway 50 into a “main street” similar to the central shopping streets to be found in Livermore, Sutter Creek, and Lancaster.

Fact: The portion of Highway 50 proposed to become a “local Main Street downtown core” is that portion from Stateline Avenue to Lake Parkway, a stretch of highway now bordered by five casinos, their driveways and their parking lots. (A Transportation Project Evolves, TTD, 12/2015) Why would pedestrians want to walk by the walled-off casinos and their parking lots? This segment of highway 50 does not and never will look like the “main streets” of towns with several tree-lined blocks of two-story, close-to-the-street shops and cafes.

According to the 2013 economic report by Economic & Planning Systems (ECS), “... some of the larger casino structures themselves present a barrier of the built environment that is not necessarily welcoming to pedestrians, bicyclists, and other non-motorized users.” To make this into a “main street” would require a redevelopment project that staggers the imagination.

Fantasy: The project will create “a more pedestrian friendly local street experience in the commercial core”. (FAQ, TTD, undated)

Fact: Isn't that what the ongoing redevelopment project, Redevelopment Project 3, was expected to provide? Has it been a failure in this respect? On the California side, there is only a short stretch on the lake side of the roadway that was not included in that redevelopment. Is it this short stretch that is to provide “a more pedestrian friendly local street experience”?

Fantasy: The project will “help revitalize local business health.” (FAQ, TTD, undated)

Fact: This, again, was and is the objective of the ongoing redevelopment project. And according to the economic analysis of ECS, the Village Center is “a very successful shopping center that enjoys considerable patronage, low vacancy, and is

an established and popular shopping destination for both local residents and visitors to the South Shore.” Much the same was reported for Heavenly Village.” So why is “revitalization” needed?

It should be noted that the economic report also stated that any economic benefit is dependent upon a long list of resort area “best practices” that are not envisioned in the project as it has been proposed to date. (EPS, pp.47-48)

It should also be noted that the same economic analysis stated that “spending among local residents ... could very conservatively increase by 5 to 10 percent as the Stateline area ... is able to capture market share within the South Shore and nearby areas.” Tell that to merchants elsewhere in South Lake Tahoe who are just hanging on by their fingernails.

Fantasy: The project “offers the potential of renovating properties on the city’s redevelopment list to provide some of the necessary housing for impacted tenants, thereby providing better housing.” (FAQ, TTD, undated)

Fact: The vagueness of this claim belies TTD’s lack of experience in housing development and the uncertainty as to whether private developers will be willing to invest in an area that has been losing population for years. The assertion that there will be public/private participation in relocating residents and businesses does not answer questions about the impact of the project on affected residents and businesses.

Fantasy: According to the TTD FAQ sheet, “The estimated cost of the project is \$70 million.” An earlier (2010) estimate by Wood Rogers was \$65 million to \$85 million depending on the alternative selected, and not including the cost of redesigning the roadway from Pioneer Trail to Kingsbury Grade. TTD District Manager Carl Hasty used the figure of \$80 million at the Feb. 10 question and answer session.

Fact: Following the Feb. 10 meeting, I asked Mr. Hasty if TTD

had a cost estimate for the project. His reply was, "I wish we did." Absent an independent cost estimate covering all elements of the project, one can only guess that it will be much greater than \$70-\$80 million. Moreover, absent a reliable cost estimate, how can we give credence to Hasty's recent statement that, "We are not looking to the city of South Lake Tahoe to finance this project"?

With all this fantasy surrounding the project, it is clear that the South Lake Tahoe City Council should not, cannot, give its approval. Does anyone this side of Stateline believe it should have the same priority with respect to our city's very limited resources as such projects as completion of Lakeside Commons, the renovation of Regan Park & Beach, the restoration of the Upper Truckee Marsh, and further development of our bike trail system?

Haven't we done enough for the Stateline area? Don't we need to focus attention on the rest of our town?

Finally, I should say that I have no financial interest in the loop road project, one way or another, save as a city, state and federal taxpayer.

Jerome Evans is a resident of South Lake Tahoe.