

Housing dominates loop road forum discussion

By Jessie Marchesseau

The loop road has been a hotly debated topic in recent years. As such, it was surprising to see more empty seats than filled ones in the conference room at Lake Tahoe Resort Hotel on Thursday night.

About 35 people were in attendance to hear Tahoe Transportation District's District Manager Carl Hasty talk about the logistics of the loop road project and what his organization views as the benefits of it.

Hasty began by explaining that even though the plan for this project has been in discussions since the 1970s, the TTD believes the need for it now is much greater than it was then. As evidence of this, he pointed to traffic problems such as how people are cutting through residential neighborhoods to avoid congestion along Lake Tahoe Boulevard, an issue the TTD believes will be resolved by the loop road. He also pointed out that the casinos are not providing the draw for tourists the way they once did, and suggested having a pedestrian-friendly resort-style commercial core may help attract more visitors.

However, the issue which earned the most talk time for the evening was South Lake Tahoe's housing woes.

Hasty mentioned time and again how hard it is for residents, especially people wanting to move to the area, to find affordable housing. He asserted that this project will help with that issue.



A sparse audience listens to Carl Hasty, head of TTD, talk about the loop road on Nov. 3. Photo/Jessie Marchesseau

For the preferred project plan which was presented at the forum, 76 current residential units would be removed. The intent is to replace those with the same number of new residential units, most likely in the form of apartment buildings along the new highway. Hasty said there is “potential” for additional housing units, but the plan as of now only includes replacing the ones being removed.

Of those 76 new residences, more than half would be designated low-income housing, and some would likely be senior housing. Hasty presented a few options for where new apartment buildings may be erected. The area behind Raley’s which is currently a parking lot is one of those options, as is the area where Naked Fish currently sits.

Hasty told attendees building this new housing would be the first step in the construction process. Before any houses are torn down, the new ones will be up, he said. Only after the housing is ready would demolition and construction of the actual road begin. Traffic would continue as usual on the current Highway 50 until the new road is completed, so traffic should be affected minimally, if at all, by the construction.

From approval to finish, Hasty estimates it to be about a five-year process.

the project is still a ways from approval. The TTD is hoping to release the draft environmental impact study for public review and comment before the holidays, which means no major decisions would be made on the project before late spring 2017.

After the presentation, attendees were encouraged to submit written questions for Hasty to answer. Many of the questions concerned the housing and existing property issues:

- Would there be any new low income housing in Nevada? It's not planned, but could be possible down the road.

- Would they be looking for money from HUD? Yes, and also California's Cap-and-Trade Program.

- Who would own the new residential units? The TTD initially, but "TTD is not looking to be in the long-term landlord business," Hasty said. They would look at other long-term options such as a land trust or companies designed to own and manage such housing.

- Would residents, both residential and commercial, be compensated for the inconvenience of construction? TTD would try to minimize the impact of construction, but Hasty said he was not sure how they could compensate a non-commercial resident for something like that.

- Would the property be acquired by eminent domain? Technically, yes, but fair market value will be offered for all parcels, and they hope to have willing sellers. Hasty said they do not want to force anyone to sell.

Other questions involved parking issues, roundabouts, overhead walkways and the upcoming election.

When asked whether he thought this project, 35 years in the

making, was actually going to happen, Hasty offered an emphatic, "Yes." He said if projects like the one in Tahoe City and the bike path on the Nevada side could finally come to fruition, this will, too.

The draft EIS for the U.S. 50 South Shore Community Revitalization Project will be available for public review sometime in the upcoming months. The Nov. 3 forum was hosted by the Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce.