

Overhaul of look, functionality of SLT's Sierra Blvd.



Sierra Boulevard in South Lake Tahoe is soon to be completely renovated. Rendering/Provided

By Susan Wood

One of South Lake Tahoe's main crosstown arteries is getting a face lift.

Once the design process is wrapped up, the city expects to begin construction on Sierra Boulevard's complete street plan – which should be next year.

The extensive transportation project driven primarily by human power is now in the environmental review phase. It heads to the city Planning Commission upon completion.

The plan would essentially represent a complete overhaul of

the thoroughfare running from Highway 50 to Barbara Avenue. At the end is where the trucks dump their snow loads.

South Lake Tahoe Public Works – joined by Tahoe Transportation District and NCE design representatives – on Thursday provided about 30 people a glimpse of the design. The meeting at the recreation center was the last scheduled community input meeting.

Many in the audience seemed heavily invested in the approximately \$6 million plan that spun out of Phase 4 of the Sierra Tract Erosion Control Project. The “boulevard” plan, which has been in the works for years and stalled in 2008, is a little more than halfway in the process.



More than two dozen people listen Nov. 2 to plans for Sierra Boulevard.
Photo/Susan Wood

It calls for curbs and gutters with storm water drains to channel the runoff that collects in mini lakes and ponds on the side of the street. Landscaping and lighting are set to illuminate a Class II bike lane, Class I 10-foot shared use path, as well as a 5-foot sidewalk for pedestrians. A crosswalk is slated to go in near Sierra Community Church, a quasi-anchor of the street.

Money is coming mostly from an Active Transportation Project grant.

And beyond the strip, a crucial component to the bicycle-friendly improvements is the connection between an improved Highway 50 and the Greenway bike project.

The city sought to cover all bases with this project – from air quality and water quality to active transport and safety. The latter led to the city's intention to install road features called "bulb outs." These bulbous sidewalk extensions are used to reduce the pedestrian crossing distance and to slow down traffic.

On most days, motorists drive down the road "like a drag strip," NCE senior engineer Christian Heinbaugh told attendees Nov. 2. The thought is the extensive width of the street gives the driver a fast, open-road feel.

But these road-narrowing features brought up questions from the group whether they would pose a hindrance to snowplowing operations – which dominated the discussion.

"Why so narrow?" a community member asked.

To that, Heinbaugh reminded those in attendance that the features were added because of public concerns expressed over the safety of the boulevard. The "bulb outs" in the street prompt motorists to slow down as they approach encroaching road features.

"It's going to feel like a 35mph road," he said of the current speed limit. New to the transportation planners' vernacular is the term "traffic calming," as if motorists need to take a chill pill.

Some attendees couldn't quite grasp where the snow would go if the boulevard and multi-use path are due to be cleared of the white stuff in winter. They treated the quizzical type of

features set to go in as something abnormally excessive, except they represent what one would find in any progressive, bike-friendly town. That conversation resulted in a more far-reaching chat about what constitutes a right-of-way and what is deemed an easement in respect to tossing the snow.

Transportation planners and engineers have learned a lot over the years about how to make these street features durable, the crowd was assured. For one thing, the separation between sidewalk features and roads are curvy in nature to where it's easier for trucks to roll over them without destroying them.

Probably the most biting part of the question-and-answer segment came up when resident Mark Cutright asked who was going to pay for the maintenance. The accusation of missing funds from recreation-oriented Measures S and R prompted Bicycle Advisory Committee member and advocate Peter Fink to insist that at least now funding is thoroughly watched and scrutinized.

Cycling advocates have long waited for improvements to make South Shore roads friendly, safe and inviting to negotiate.

Motorists have long wanted to keep their oil pans on their vehicles as they take the boulevard, which is substantially beat up by truck traffic.

Residents have long wanted relief from flooding roads in big winters like last year.

When asked by *Lake Tahoe News* if NCE has witnessed whether these types of improvements in other communities prompt street-side property owners to make upgrades of their own, Heinbaugh was undecided but called it "logical."

If anything, the city is going for a more pleasing look.

"It'll definitely spruce up the neighborhood," city engineer Stan Hill told *LTN* before the meeting.