

Tourists ignore signs not to drive in neighborhoods



Signs are not enough to keep tourists from trying to find a short cut through residential areas. Photo/Jessie Marchesseau

By Jessie Marchesseau

MEYERS – Tourists are not paying attention to the signs designed to keep them on Highway 50 and out of South Shore neighborhoods.

El Dorado County Supervisor Sue Novasel said the signs were largely ineffective in diverting tourists from residential roads. She said the signs may be too hard to see or people are just following their GPS directions and not even paying attention to them.

Rafael Martinez, director of transportation for the county, explained that nonetheless, the presence of the signs enables law enforcement to cite drivers who end up stuck or run off

the road in those areas. California Highway Patrol officers and El Dorado County sheriff's deputies ticketed such drivers this winter. Martinez said the hope is that those drivers will spread the message to other drivers which will, in turn, start to deter nonlocals from choosing to use those routes.

On April 18, the county hosted a community meeting at the Lake Tahoe Environmental Science Magnet School to discuss traffic issues in the Lake Tahoe Basin, particularly on Sundays and holidays.

Representatives from El Dorado County Department of Transportation, Board of Supervisors and county counsel as well as the California Highway Patrol shared the results of the two pilot programs put into place this winter and discussed other options being considered for the future.

One of the pilot programs involved putting up 25 signs on residential roads warning drivers of traction control requirements.

In response to a suggestion of using "chains required" instead of "traction control" signs, Novasel explained that actual chain control signs require the presence of a chain installation area which the county does not have, nor could they be installed in multiple residential areas. It would also require hiring someone to turn or open/close the signs as conditions changed.

A suggestion was posed for adding flashing solar lights to the signs to make them more visible, something the county already explored, but at \$800 per sign, Martinez explained they were not sure it would be the most effective use of their limited budget.

The second pilot program put into place this winter was what Martinez referred to as "the nudge." It was an effort in behavioral modification of drivers attempting to use North Upper Truckee to leave town on Sundays. Signs were placed on

Lake Tahoe Boulevard directing drivers to use Sawmill Road to get back to Highway 50 in order to leave town. "The nudge" was first implemented on March 4 and again on three more Sundays.

Much more effective than the traction control signs, Martinez said an unofficial study by the transportation department indicated that 60-70 percent of traffic was abiding by the signage and using Sawmill to get back to Highway 50 instead of North Upper Truckee. Considering that a large portion of the cars not obeying the signs was likely local traffic, he estimated the compliance rate could have been as high as 90 percent by tourists.

The nudge will be implemented again four times this summer and then reevaluated as a feasible and effective mid-range, though likely not long-term, solution. Expect to see signs diverting drivers down Sawmill on Memorial Day weekend, Fourth of July, celebrity golf week, and Labor Day weekend.

The cost of the program was about \$800 for the signs and \$300 to install and take down the setup each time. Should the project continue, it would need to be accounted for in future transportation budgets.

The panel proceeded to review status of the **21 suggestions** gathered at the Feb. 28 community meeting.

The suggestion which received the most discussion and perhaps holds the most hope is putting the focus on the agriculture inspection station in Meyers. Part 1 involves installing signs notifying drivers that they are required by law to pass through the inspection station.

Part 2, and perhaps more important, EDC is drafting a letter to road mapping app companies alerting them to the state statute requiring motorists to pass through the station when entering California. The hope is that companies, in an effort to abide by state laws, will only direct drivers to leave the basin via Highway 50 through the inspection station.

County Counsel Mike Ciccozzi said there is a loophole the companies may use to avoid doing so. If that happens, it could result in lengthy litigation. While he does consider that a possibility, he says he is hoping it does not end up that way and they simply agree.

He expects the letter to be ready to send out within the next week or two.

A few other suggestions were offered up by residents at the meeting, but most had little traction. One person suggested adding a “local traffic only” lane onto Highway 50 for locals trying to get to Meyers. Novasel explained that widening Highway 50 had already been explored and was out of the question.

Another resident who lives off of Sawmill requested turning the traffic around at the high school. Martinez said that location is in the city, not the county, and the city had declined to do so, not wanting to direct traffic back into its jurisdiction.

Someone else suggested making Tahoe a little less attractive on holiday weekends so there aren’t quite as many people coming to town, such as a higher TOT tax. Novasel said that is unlikely as it will require legislation to do so.

So, while there is no long-term solution out there right now, Martinez said they are exploring solutions to work in the short- and mid-term while an ultimate long-term solution is decided and implemented.