

Opinion: Caltrans work hurting Tahoe businesses

By Bruce Grego

Years ago, we, in South Lake Tahoe, could look forward to summer. Nowadays, we can look “forward” to Caltrans construction season on Highway 50.

The construction activity that continues for still another year on Highway 50, regarding the installation of drainage and sidewalks, is disruptive to small businesses. I realize that you can't make an omelette without breaking some eggs, but to have Caltrans conduct all summer construction activities on our principal roadway is not acceptable.



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As an example, part of Highway 50's lanes were closed off (last week) between Tahoe Keys Boulevard and Sierra Boulevard and traffic was reduced to one lane traveling east. Traffic not only backed up on Highway 50, but also Tahoe Keys Boulevard and Third Street. The summer traffic hasn't even started. Also, at 5:06pm that day, the crew stopped working.

Last fall, Councilmember Tom Davis invited me to attend a meeting with Caltrans in the city manager's office, where we discussed the problems that developed the previous summer. It seemed, to me, that Caltrans was, at least, listening to our concerns. But, as this season develops, no changes have

occurred. One of the promises made was that the center turning lane would be used to replace the left lane during construction. This suggestion alone would alleviate many of the concerns and reduce the impact upon small business by allowing the free flow of traffic. But, so far, this proposal has not been implemented by Caltrans.

Presently, the contractor, working for Caltrans, is busy tearing up our highway for the next section of work. Even though there were cones running from the Tahoe Keys intersection to Sierra Boulevard, I counted only seven employees working on this section. Really! One way to reduce the impact of this construction is to have a greater number of construction personnel working on the project.

In the last few years, we have seen the same pattern of sparse construction activity affecting the use of our highway. Only in the last weeks of the season, after the first snows and before winter actually begins, does the contractor add additional personnel to complete the work for that season. This methodology is not acceptable, but it proves that construction can proceed more quickly, if the contractor so chooses.

When you consider the fact that Caltrans will soon begin work on the roundabout near the bus station in Meyers, and then the reconstruction of the Echo Summit bridge in 2019, which will close traffic for an entire summer or more, what exactly should small businesses expect to do during these periods? You don't have to conduct a study to know that the majority of businesses in this town earn their money from Memorial Day to Labor Day. We have Caltrans continuing to interfere with this business season to the significant detriment of everyone.

Where is local government protecting our interests? We do not have to accept the status quo. If we have the will, we can change Caltrans' mythology. Our council can call for a special meeting if they want and discuss openly with Caltrans the need

to change. Our council can open a dialogue with our state representative and demand action. The contract between Caltrans and the contractor can be examined to assure full timely performance. If Caltrans doesn't get it, or doesn't care, then maybe more formal action brought by local government needs to be pursued. But the first thing local government has to declare is that the present system of construction on our highway is not acceptable. If they can pass legislation concerning plastic straws, why can't we do more in protecting the business community that supports our workers and of course pay the taxes that support local government. The time to act is now.

Bruce Grego is a resident of South Lake Tahoe and former council member.