

County drives ahead with carpool lanes

By Roger Phelps, The Telegraph

El Dorado County plans to continue work on the Highway 50 carpool lanes, despite a state freeze in spending.



Philip Wood/The Telegraph

Carpool-lane work will continue by El Dorado County at Bass Lake Grade despite a state recommendation to stop it because of budget woes.

California Treasurer Bill Lockyer on Dec. 17 flashed the yellow stoplight on a number of stated-assisted highway projects. The Bass Lake Grade project on U.S. Highway 50 has state Transportation Commission approval for \$20 million in aid. However, the county can and will press on without the state money, said Richard Shepard, transportation department director.

“We have enough other money to keep going,” Shepard said. “We have some strategies.”

Construction began early this month. Transportation officials have projected that the extra lanes will be needed to prevent jams when commute rush-hour traffic is combined with the vehicles of gambling junketeers headed to Red Hawk Casino near Shingle Springs. The casino opened this month.

Shepard predicted state assistance eventually would come through.

“In the future, once the state passes a budget, I believe these funds will be secured,” he said. “The money is already allocated by the Transportation Commission. This is unprecedented, where money is allocated that the agency can’t spend.”

Lockyer has estimated the funding freeze will save more than \$600 million a month, which can be turned toward paying the state’s bills.

Future carpool-lane work east of Bass Lake Grade through Cameron Park is to be funded through a Red Hawk Casino settlement agreement between the county and the Shingle Springs Band of Miwok Indians, casino owners.

Eventually, it is planned that carpool lanes will extend eastward on the highway to Greenstone Road, just past the casino.