



Transportation

December 31, 2016 10:00 AM

What happened to that planned expressway through east Sacramento County?

Additional stretches of White Rock Road someday will be expanded to four lanes with a center median - if proponents can find the money. Randall Benton RBenton@sacbee.com

By Tony Bizjak

tbizjak@sacbee.com

For years, leaders in east Sacramento County have been laying the groundwork for what they call the Capital SouthEast Connector, a 34-mile beltway that would carve through ranchlands behind Folsom and Rancho Cordova, serving as a commute alternative to Highways 50 and 99.

It's been a slow slog, beset by lawsuits, coordination issues, and most notably a lack of money.

The effort suffered a setback in November when voters rejected Measure B, the Sacramento County transportation half-cent sales tax that would have provided \$125 million for the project – more than a third of the connector's estimated \$335 million construction cost.

Despite that, proponents say they intend to get the massive project built. They just aren't sure when.

"It was a shame," said Tom Zlotkowski, executive director of the connector joint powers authority, of the sales tax ballot failure. "We came so close. We just need to look at other sources of funding."

The planned connector would be a four-lane expressway with a center median and a bike trail, much of it an expansion of Grant Line Road and White Rock roads. It would connect to Highway 50 at the Silva Valley interchange in El Dorado County at its northeast end, as well as to Highway 99 in south Elk Grove and Interstate 5 south of Sacramento at its southwest terminus.

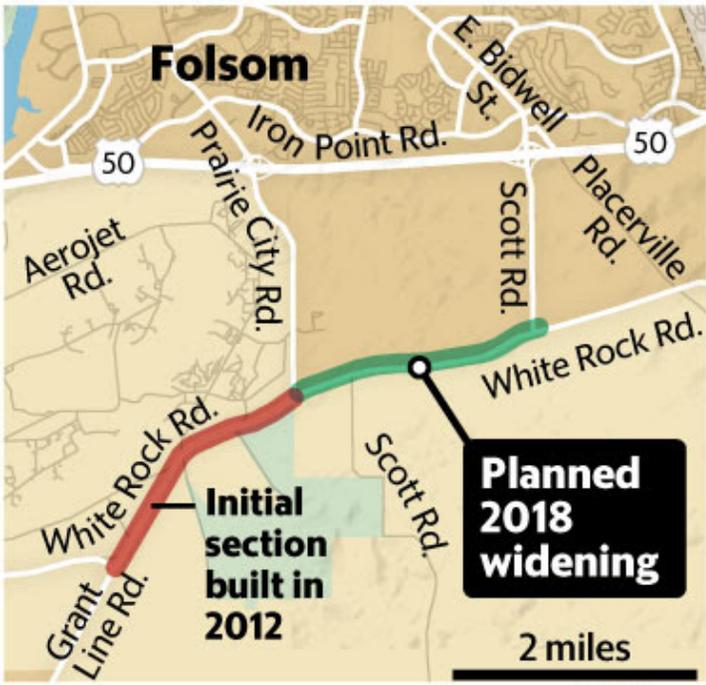
The connector joint powers board – made up of representatives from Sacramento and El Dorado counties, and from the cities of Folsom, Elk Grove and Rancho Cordova – will reconvene in January to discuss next steps.

Incoming joint powers chairman David Sander, a Rancho Cordova councilman, said the lack of visible progress on the project doesn't mean the cities and counties aren't working hard and making some progress behind the scenes.

"No dirt being moved, but an awful lot of paperwork is being moved," Sander said. "I'm not sure what requires heavier equipment."

The agency is conducting environmental, engineering and design studies to prepare for construction if and when new local, state or federal transportation funds arrive.

Sander estimates it will take another several decades to get the expressway built. Even then, it will be a smaller road than first imagined. Previously, officials talked of building six lanes in some spots, with interchanges instead of intersections, with an estimated cost at one point of \$700 million.



Route for planned expressway

Officials hope to expand Grant Line and White Rock roads into a four-lane expressway with a center median, to be called Capital SouthEast Connector. A new two-mile section will be built in 2018 between Prairie City Road and Scott Road.

Source: Sacramento County Department of Transportation

SHARON OK

Eventually, when expected east county growth causes congestion on the new road, the connector could be turned into a full expressway by turning intersections into interchanges, connector executive Zlotkowski said. Those, however, likely would have to be paid for by housing and other land developers, he said. "Our idea is to fund the four-lane project, and if and when some of these intersections need to be upgraded, that is on the developers," he said. The group built an initial 2.2-mile section in 2012, expanding and straightening part of White Rock, from Grant Line to Prairie City Road. That section offers a preview of what the entire corridor will look like. Future sections are expected to have a bike trail separated from the roadway. Despite the November ballot box setback, the connector project is far from financially bereft. It is in line to receive \$118 million over the next two decades from the county's existing Measure A transportation sales tax, approved by voters in 2004. The connector group also will collect fees from developers who build housing projects near the connector corridor. The group currently has \$15 million it plans to use in 2018 to further widen another 2 miles of White Rock Road to four lanes between Prairie City Road and the northern branch of Scott Road. Planners said they had hoped to build a longer section all the way to Latrobe Road in El Dorado County but do not yet have the extra \$24 million that would cost. The road remains among the most polarizing projects in the region. It is popular among officials in Folsom, Rancho Cordova and Elk Grove who say it will serve as a pressure-release valve for congested Highways 99 and 50, offering a secondary route for future east county commuters. "We have more jobs than people," Councilman Sander of Rancho Cordova said. "Tens of thousands of people are driving there to work each day. That (jobs) center is going to grow in size. That becomes a regional issue. That is an economic engine." Folsom city officials call the connector road "an essential secondary route" to handle traffic from the 26,000 people expected to reside on what are now open fields south of Highway 50 and north of White Rock Road in the next quarter-century.

Others, including environmentalists, officials and residents of rural east Sacramento County say the road could encourage more sprawl-style growth and tens of thousands of new cars cutting through the southeast county.

The Environmental Council of Sacramento, which advocates for more infill housing development in existing urban areas, sued the connector group in 2012. Connector officials settled that lawsuit, agreeing to spend some funds to buy land on the southeast side of the road for open space preservation and species habitat. How much land and at what cost is still uncertain.

Council board member Sean Wirth said environmentalists and the connector group are in communication, and the environmentalists will continue pushing to limit the road's negative impacts. "We continue to be worried that road will allow greater access to new development," Wirth said.

Zlotkowski, the head of the connector joint powers group, said the road will be built in small chunks over the years, but the current prep work being done puts his group in a position to move quickly, if some "ifs" happen: if east county development steps up, providing fee money; and if the state and federal governments make good on efforts to stabilize transportation funding to cities and counties.

"This is a 34-mile project; that is unprecedented," he said. "It pretty much doesn't happen anymore. I think we are moving expeditiously now. If the money appears, it will accelerate quite quickly."

Tony Bizjak: [916-321-1059](tel:916-321-1059), [@TonyBizjak](https://twitter.com/TonyBizjak)