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## **Growth, traffic on ballot in March**

### **An initiative ties building to Highway 50 improvements.**

**By Cathy Locke -- Bee Staff Writer - *(Published September 19, 2004)***

Measures dealing with traffic and growth issues in El Dorado County will go before the voters in March.

The Board of Supervisors on Tuesday scheduled a March 8 election for a referendum on the county's newly adopted general plan and an initiative that would tie future single-family residential development in the county to improvements to Highway 50.

Both measures are sponsored by a group led by current and former elected officials who oppose the 2004 general plan adopted by the Board of Supervisors in July.

The group argues that the amount of development the plan allows would result in traffic that exceeds Highway 50's capacity.

"Our hands are tied. We have to put this on the ballot," Supervisor Jack Sweeney said in making the motion to schedule the general plan referendum for the March ballot.

County Counsel Louis Green said the board could wait and place the referendum on the ballot of the next regularly scheduled county election, March 2006, or it could call a special election.

The "No Gridlock" measure missed the deadline for the November ballot, but as an initiative and county charter amendment it required the board to schedule a special election in March. Green said supervisors could place both measures on the same ballot.

Property owners attending Tuesday's meeting urged the board to put the measures to a vote as soon as possible. Until the issues are resolved, the development potential of thousands of parcels remains uncertain.

"Putting an election off to 2006 is ludicrous," county resident Bob Johnson said.

The county's inability to put a general plan in place has become very personal, he said, adding that he and his son have been looking for property that they could split to build their homes. Johnson said he was told that if he wanted a parcel that he could split, he should look outside the county.

Jim Davies, representing owners of property along Black Rice Road in the Diamond Springs area, said their parcels are among those that would be subject to development constraints under the "No Gridlock" initiative.

"It appears we've been condemned," he said. "When does the county say, 'You have worthless property, and I'm sorry?'"

The inability to develop the land due to lack of a general plan, Davies said, is "painful financially as well as to our own psyches."

Land use in the county has been governed by a court writ of mandate since 1999, when a Sacramento Superior Court judge ruled that the environmental impact report for the 1996 general plan failed to specify the effect that residential growth would have on traffic, water and quality of life in the foothills.

Although supervisors adopted a new general plan July 19, it will not become effective until a judge is satisfied that terms of the writ have been met.

Under the writ, development in the county generally is limited to projects for which development agreements had been granted before the court order.

At Tuesday's meeting, Green presented an analysis of the impact the "No Gridlock" initiative would have on development and road improvements in the county.

He acknowledged that many of the effects were speculative pending a response from initiative proponents about the intent of the measure.

The board had directed the county counsel to try to clarify the intent before the initiative goes to the voters, but Green said his staff members had not submitted questions to initiative proponents in time to receive a formal response before the analysis was presented.

A major question, he said, was whether the initiative was intended to apply to projects that already have development agreements.

Green noted that the initiative has two parts. The first prohibits the Board of Supervisors from adopting a general plan that allows traffic congestion on Highway 50 west of Placerville to reach level of service F - stop-and-go conditions - during peak-hour commute periods at general plan build-out.

The second part specifies that to prevent such conditions, the board won't approve additional single-family residential lot splits or subdivisions of three or more parcels until Highway 50 has been widened to eight lanes between Cameron Park Drive and the Sacramento County line to accommodate traffic from previously approved projects.

Supervisor Charlie Paine, a backer of the initiative, said he understood the measure would not affect projects already granted development agreements.

Approximately 23,000 residences can be built under the court order. Of those 23,000, existing development agreements allow 14,000 houses, while the owners of an additional 9,000 vacant parcels in residential zones have the right to build one house per parcel.

If all those homes were to be built, traffic would exceed acceptable levels on Highway 50, Paine said.

"Having growth go on without infrastructure is not fair to the people," Paine said. "No one is going to want to move here."

Supervisor Sweeney argued, however, that build-out figures are based on every parcel developing to its full potential, and due to topography and other circumstances, that won't occur. None of the specific plans in the area has been built to capacity, he said. "Most get about 75 percent to 80 percent of what they were allocated," Sweeney said.

Supervisor Helen Baumann said she was concerned that the initiative would hinder the county's ability to pay for road improvements. Much of the money comes from development fees, but those funds won't be forthcoming if development is prohibited, she said.

She also argued that it would hamper the county's efforts to provide more affordable housing.

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