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Home building fall leaves El Dorado County short of road funds

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The decline in new home construction means less money to build roads in El Dorado County.

But some members the county Board of Supervisors expressed dismay that the El Dorado Hills area, long the county's fastest-growing community, appeared to be taking the biggest hit in terms of proposed road projects.

"El Dorado Hills is a huge economic generator for us," said Supervisor Helen Baumann, whose district covers part of the community. "This is a huge statement to anyone wanting to come into the county."

Transportation Director Richard Shepard presented the department's proposed five-year capital improvement program to the board Jan. 29.

Shepard said the program, identifying projects for fiscal 2007-08 through 2011-12, assumes a reduction in revenue from traffic impact mitigation fees. The one-time fee is paid by new development to offset the cost of road improvements needed to serve growth.

The five-year program presented last week calls for \$536.2 million worth of projects. Approximately \$456.4 million is targeted for projects on the county's west slope and about \$79.8 million for the Tahoe Basin.

Revenue projections assume that 600 new homes will be built annually on the west slope during the five-year period. Three hundred of those homes are anticipated in the El Dorado Hills area, and the remaining 300 in other west slope communities.

In recent years, the number of new homes in western El Dorado County has ranged from 1,200 to 1,500 annually, Shepard said.

To further complicate the funding picture, 200 of the 300 anticipated permits in El Dorado Hills are expected to come from the Blackstone development, he said. But the developer has prepaid about \$21 million in traffic impact mitigation fees to advance major transportation improvements in the area and must be credited with those advance payments. That means future traffic impact fee revenues from the Blackstone project will be reduced, Shepard said.

Projects affected by the decline in revenue include the extension of Saratoga Way west to Folsom, where it would connect with Iron Point Road. The long-awaited link is expected to relieve traffic congestion on Highway 50.

Construction had been planned in 2011, but it would be moved beyond the five-year time frame under the proposed program.

Other projects that would be delayed beyond the five-year horizon include improvements to Highway 50 interchanges at El Dorado Hills Boulevard and Bass Lake Road, as well as at Cambridge Road and Cameron Park Drive in Cameron Park.

Preliminary planning for widening White Rock Road from two to four lanes between Latrobe Road and the planned Silva Valley Parkway interchange in El Dorado Hills also would be delayed. Although, Shepard said, the Silva Valley Parkway interchange project is fully funded.

"There's still an awful lot of work going on out there," he said.

The Department of Transportation has \$33 million worth of projects under construction and expects to

award an additional \$22 million in contracts this year, Shepard said.

But the supervisors and members of the public said they feared delaying some projects would limit the effectiveness of those that are scheduled for construction and hinder economic development efforts.

"Some of the roads moved out (of the capital improvement program) I think are critical to some of the facilities we want to build," said Supervisor Jack Sweeney.

He said the board and transportation staff needed to take a couple of weeks to re-evaluate the criteria for prioritizing projects.

Debbie Manning, El Dorado Hills Chamber of Commerce's chief executive officer, said that despite the downturn in the housing market, growth continues in the community's commercial areas and business parks.

"To continue to grow, you have the infrastructure," she said.

Judy Mathat, a real estate agent and member of the Shingle Springs-Cameron Park Chamber of Commerce, urged the board to specifically consider the need for Highway 50 interchange improvements from Bass Lake Road to South Shingle Road. Cameron Park and Shingle Springs have lost out on economic development opportunities because of traffic-flow issues, she said.

Supervisor Baumann complained that the county is forced to take a piecemeal approach to road improvements because its fee structure doesn't allow flexibility.

Shepard said restrictions on the use of certain fee revenue do affect when and how projects are funded.

"When you have a revenue source tied to a project type, you can't shift it to another type," he said.

The board agreed to continue its discussion of the proposed capital improvement program during a workshop Feb. 11.

The session will follow a joint meeting with the Planning Commission to review the county's road classification system. It will begin at 1:30 p.m. in the board meeting room, 330 Fair Lane, Building A, Placerville.

The proposed capital improvement program is available on the Department of Transportation's Web site at www.co.el-dorado.ca.us/dot/.

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