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Highway 50 carpool lanes put on hold

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El Dorado County officials had planned today to celebrate starting a \$41 million extension of Highway 50 carpool lanes through El Dorado Hills.

Instead, they're wringing hands over the state halting funding for public works projects, including the freeway expansion – just as the new Red Hawk Casino has added traffic.

Now, the county must decide whether to wait out the state or to redirect local transportation monies to cover the full cost of the carpool lanes.

Gayle Erbe-Hamlin, county chief administrative officer, postponed the groundbreaking until the Board of Supervisors has a chance to discuss the state's action, said Mike Applegarth, a spokesman for the CAO's office.

The high-profile groundbreaking had been scheduled so Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and several high-ranking state transportation officials could attend.

The project is to build carpool lanes from the Sacramento County line to the Bass Lake Road interchange to alleviate commute traffic and traffic generated by the Red Hawk Casino, which opened Wednesday in Shingle Springs.

It would be the start of a three-phase plan to extend carpool lanes to the new Red Hawk Parkway interchange, which serves the casino.

Speaking to the El Dorado Local Agency Formation Commission, Supervisor Jack Sweeney vented his anger Wednesday over "the latest financial disaster the Legislature has put us in."

The California Transportation Commission allocated \$20 million toward the carpool lane project, and the county last month awarded the contract to Benicia-based Nehemiah Construction Inc. on that basis.

"I don't know how any agency will operate ... when the state can withdraw funds," Sweeney said.

Kathryn Mathews, the county Transportation Commission's executive director, said more than half the money for the carpool lane project comes from a variety of locally controlled funds.

"That is enough to carry the project for about a year," she said. "We have about \$24 million in project funds from other than Proposition 1B."

The state monies were to be provided through Proposition 1B, a transportation bond measure voters approved in 2006.

Applegarth said the county could shift local transportation dollars from other projects to pay for the carpool lanes through El Dorado Hills but that the decision will be up to the Board of Supervisors.

"We have \$20 million of state Prop. 1B funding (allocated) and a great bid from the contractor," Applegarth said. "We wouldn't want to jeopardize that."

Although the board awarded the construction contract in November, Applegarth said the county has not notified the contractor to proceed, so it would not be required to pay for any work already performed by the contractor.

He said the board will hold a special closed session next week to discuss whether to go forward with the Highway 50 project.

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