

# CALAVERAS COUNCIL BUDGETS FOR ROADS

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SAN ANDREAS - The Calaveras Council of Governments is planning to spend about \$3.4 million a year over the next five years to maintain and improve the county's roads and highways.

The problem is, the agency only expects to get about \$2.9 million in revenue in the fiscal year that begins July 1, and changes in the federal system for funding roads make funding after that uncertain.

"We have definitely more need, more projects than we have revenue coming into the region," said Melissa Eads, executive director of the Council of Governments, the entity that performs transportation planning and funnels state and federal dollars to projects in the county.

The Council of Governments' board of directors on Wednesday voted 6-0 with board member Debbie Ponte absent to approve the \$2.9 million expenditure plan for the agency's overall work program for the fiscal year that begins July 1.

Board Chairman Paul Stein asked Eads if the expenditure plan was a "status quo" budget.

Eads said that it is, even though it is down slightly from the \$3.2 million in overall work for the year the board approved in March. The change, Eads said, came largely because the Council of Governments succeeded in shifting responsibility for several projects to Angels Camp or to the Calaveras County Public Works Department.

Still, Eads said, even this year's status quo budget falls far short of the work needed in the region.

She said that during her agency's most recent call for projects, Calaveras County agencies listed about \$100 million in needs.

The biggest pending highway improvement for Calaveras is the Wagon Trail Project, which would straighten a winding, six-mile section of Highway 4 between Angels Camp and Copperopolis.

Curves in that part of Highway 4 still follow contours set in the days when horse-drawn wagons used the route, often slowing modern traffic to 30 mph or less.

Calaveras leaders say improving that highway section is vital to help speed tourists and vacation home owners to the cabins, wineries, skiing, forests and other attractions around Murphys, Arnold and Bear Valley. Tourism remains one of the most vibrant sectors of the region's economy.

But the estimated \$60 million cost of the project could mean that it takes a decade or more for Calaveras to accumulate enough highway funding to get it built.

And a change in the federal system for allocating highway funding makes that money even more uncertain, Eads said.

Rather than an apportionment based on population, the federal government this year has switched to a competitive system for awarding funding. California is still working out how it will implement the new federal highway funding law, Eads said.

Next year, once the rules for the new funding system are clear, Calaveras leaders will have to revisit their highway priorities in light of those new rules, Eads said.

One possible bright spot: The Council of Governments is teaming up with county Public Works staff, Caltrans and the U.S. Forest Service to apply for a \$4.4 million Federal Lands Access Program grant.

That money, if it is granted, would go a long way toward paying the costs of designing the Wagon Trail improvements and thus helping people reach destinations in the Stanislaus National Forest.

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