

## COMPROMISE ON HIGHWAY INTERSECTION MAY SPARE HISTORIC VALLEY SPRINGS

### TURN LANES COULD EASE JAMS WITHOUT ROUNDABOUT, SIGNAL

By ***Dana M. Nichols***

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VALLEY SPRINGS - The heart of historic Valley Springs would remain largely untouched, and traffic improvements would be kept to the minimum necessary to reduce congestion, under a new proposal that emerged Tuesday for fixing the intersection of Highways 12 and 26.

Calaveras County officials and representatives from the California Department of Transportation have searched for more than a decade for ways to ease daily delays at the four-way stop sign in the center of Valley Springs. The Calaveras County Board of Supervisors studied two of the latest proposals Tuesday: a traffic light complete with wider approaches and left turn lanes at a cost of about \$4.1 million, or a roundabout that would cost \$2.5 million.

Supervisor Gary Tofanelli, who represents Valley Springs, said he didn't like either.

"I'm not in agreement with destroying the ambience of that downtown," Tofanelli said. His objections included the way the intersections would limit driveway access for businesses, and his belief that the intersections would force more traffic onto neighboring side streets.

Many Valley Springs-area residents voiced similar concerns.

"All you're creating is a concrete jungle in the middle of town that's going to accomplish nothing," Andy Ballantyne said.

If engineers come up with a project that wins support from local elected leaders and Caltrans officials, work could start a year from now, and the improved intersection could be open in January 2012, said Tom Garcia, director of the county's Public Works Department.

Matt Boyer is an engineering consultant with Dokken Engineering who helped prepare the proposals. Boyer told the board the designs were chosen to be acceptable to the California Department of Transportation, which has the final say on state highway projects, and to be eligible for federal Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality funding, which requires the improvements to reduce fuel use and pollution, in this case by reducing the time drivers spend waiting to get through the intersection.

Yet the faster traffic would mean widened highway approaches, loss of parking spaces and loss of at least one building close to the intersection.

At the same time, many residents have long hoped for a much more expensive project that would create a bypass to the south of downtown and avoid the need for the upgraded intersection.

Tofanelli urged engineers to plan improvements less than the full-blown intersection that would speed traffic at least for the next 10 years.

He suggested creating right-turn-only lanes from northbound 26 to eastbound 12, and from eastbound 12 to southbound 26. That and the addition of some left-turn bays on the three busiest sides of the intersection could reduce wait times without requiring a signal or a roundabout.

Boyer agreed that the concept would work, and said he even thought it might win Caltrans approval and qualify for the federal Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality funding.

Supervisors Russ Thomas and Tom Tryon said they also supported Tofanelli's suggestion. The board directed Boyer and Public Works Department staff to come up with a "minimal" intersection improvement plan and to present it to Valley Springs residents sometime soon for comment.

That won applause from representatives from several factions within Valley Springs.

"You have just really given us some real hope for our town," said Colleen Platt, a member of MyValleySprings.com, a group that advocates on land use and planning issues.

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