

Supervisor, CUSD at odds over JL project

By Nick Baptista

The Valley Springs News/ July 25, 2012

A \$1 million project to improve student safety walking to and from the Jenny Lind Elementary School received the green light Tuesday from the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors to go to bid, but not without controversy.

District 5 Supervisor Darren Spellman made the motion approving plans, specifications and authorizing the public works department to solicit formal bids for construction after criticizing Calaveras Unified School District officials for not following through on earlier promises to help fund the project.

The school district, Spellman said, originally agreed to spend \$130,000 on the project, cut that amount to \$65,000 and now is not contributing "one dime" to it.

"CUSD is not the only one on a tight budget," he added.

Planned improvements include construction of a sidewalk and bike route on the eastern side only of State Route 26 and Driver Road from Baldwin Street to the school. The project will provide improvements including installation of curb and gutter, storm drains and culverts, striping and retaining walls. Construction of the improvements will be confined to the existing right-of-way of State Route 26 and Driver Road.

Work will take approximately two months and construction costs are estimated at \$804,000 to \$1,016,535 total.

The state, through a Safe Routes to School grant, is providing \$900,000. County Service Area No. 1 is contributing a \$65,000 match and local transportation funds are being used for another match of \$51,535.

As it stands now, the project is nearly \$100,000 over existing funding and "it is not clear that sufficient funds will be available to complete the project as originally envisioned," according to the public works staff report to the board. "To address the potential funding shortfall, several deductive alternates have been included in the bid proposal. If bids exceed the available funding, the designated alternative(s) will be deducted from the bid to arrive at a project that equal to or less than the amount of funding available (\$707,084).

Spellman blamed the shortfall on the school district's lack of financial participation and hoped any scaling back of the project did not come to the detriment of the school children's safety.

He added the school board election is coming up in November and school officials, such as Trustee Sherri Reusche, should be held accountable by voters for their lack of financial support on this project.

The project, which received the grant award in 2006, is expected to be completed in 2013.

CUSD Superintendent Mark Campbell agreed with Spellman that at one time the

district promised to contribute toward the project, but many things have changed since 2006.

"It took so long, we can no longer politically or fiscally make a contribution," said Campbell, who was not the superintendent when the district entered into the project.

If the district were to contribute the \$60,000 to \$65,000 in question it would amount to losing a teacher, he explained.

In addition, he said CUSD officials were assured there was enough money at the county to see the project through without a contribution from the school district.

"We're not trying to short-circuit the project or get something for free," Campbell said. "We just don't have the money today."

Campbell said it was his decision alone- not the school board's- to forego providing matching funds toward the Safe Routes to School project.

Spellman's motion to move forward with the project received the full support of the board.