

## Supervisors push 12/26 intersection proposal forward

By Nick Baptista

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A proposal to improve traffic flow at the downtown Valley Springs intersection of State Route 12/26 passed a major milestone Tuesday when the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors unanimously approved an environmental document for the project.

The proposed project consists of minor improvements to the existing four-way stop controlled intersection without changing the stop-sign control. The project will re-stripe the intersection with 12-foot travel lanes, and bike lanes, and provide for a free right movement from the northbound SR 26 leg onto the eastbound SR 12/26 combined lane.

Other than no improvement at all, it was the least costly of three alternatives presented to the public.

Valley Springs resident Gary Caldwell criticized the “interim improvement” or so-called “Tofanelli Plan.”

“You get what you pay for,” Caldwell told the board, and he characterized going for the least expensive plan as “trying to do it on the cheap.”

Keeping the stop signs and adding the right turn lane for San Andreas-bound traffic will not improve air quality to any great extent, the main reason for funding, because the stop-and-start traffic pattern through the intersection will continue, he said.

The study says the improvements will be good for about eight years and then the intersection will need to be torn up again, Caldwell added, likely for three or four times the cost of doing the work now.

He advocated turning the intersection into a roundabout where there would be no stopping traffic.

The interim improvement proposal has been dubbed the “Tofanelli Plan” because District 1 Supervisor Gary Tofanelli introduced the idea after sentiment at earlier public workshops opposed proposals to place traffic signals or a roundabout at the intersection.

The public expressed concern about the costs for signalization or a roundabout and the impact on buildings and parking spaces in the downtown.

Preliminary budget costs for the Tofanelli Plan have been pegged at \$1.2 million, much less than estimates of \$4.1 million for a traffic signal and \$2.5 million for a roundabout.

In addition, the extended right-turn proposal would maintain many of the buildings and parking spaces that would have been eliminated in the signal or roundabout alternatives.

Caldwell said the county has plenty of money in road-improvement reserve funds to pay for what he said were the better alternatives.

Department of Public Works Senior Engineer Jonathan Mitchell said studies indicate the proposal before the board would improve the level of service at the intersection better than a signal or roundabout.

He added funding is a concern because the county has to always be prepared for cost over-runs and there needs to be enough in the account for the next project, which will be in Angels Camp.

The Valley Springs intersection improvement proposal calls for a 90 percent reimbursement from the federal government with a 10 percent match coming from the county's Road Improvement Mitigation account.

District 5 Supervisor Darren Spellman made the motion to adopt the Mitigated Negative Declaration for the proposed project. Supervisor Merita Callaway seconded the motion, Callaway, Spellman, Tofanelli, Tom Tryon and Steve Wilensky voted in favor.

"It's a step forward," Tofanelli said after the meeting.

The project now goes into the design phase, he added.

Construction could begin later this year with completion in 2013.

The environmental document also drew praise from a west Calaveras history organization.

"The Society for the Preservation of West Calaveras History is very pleased that Caltrans in its Negative Mitigated Declaration for the 12/26 Intersection Improvement Project has agreed with us that the railroad depot and Good Friends Café building meet the criteria for inclusion in the NRHP (National Register of Historic Places) as individually eligible properties at the local level of significance," said Sal Manna, president of the organization.

"Though we would also have included the Valley Inn building in that category, this is a major step for historic preservation in our community. The SPWCH indeed hopes that the project will have 'no impact' on the eligible properties as the Caltrans study states."