

CALAVERAS OKS BIKE PATH DESPITE SHARP CRITICISM

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SAN ANDREAS - Calaveras County is going ahead with plans to build a sidewalk and bicycle path to Jenny Lind Elementary School despite a bitter dispute with school officials over the path.

In 2008, the California Department of Transportation awarded more than \$200,000 in Safe Routes to School funding for the path. Initially, school officials signed off on the plan, but they now want a different route, saying the sidewalk proposed along Highway 26 is too dangerous.

"It is frustrating to watch taxpayer money being wasted," said Sherri Reusche, the Calaveras Unified School District trustee who represents Jenny Lind Elementary School.

Reusche said she would prefer that the path avoid Highway 26 by instead using an easement between several neighborhood homes that would lead to a church parking lot.

County officials note that the project has been in the works for years. They say delaying it for a re-design would put the work past a deadline to spend the funding.

In that case, Calaveras County would not only lose the funding but be less likely to receive funding from Caltrans for future projects, County Director of Public Works Tom Garcia said.

"The funds are going to sunset," Garcia said. "We need to put something on the ground."

Garcia said the proposed easement route between neighborhood homes can be done as a second-phase project. He also noted that although there may be a private easement between the homes controlled by the Rancho Calaveras Homeowners Association, there is no public easement that would allow a government entity to build a bicycle and pedestrian path.

County officials have faced a groundswell of outrage from Jenny Lind parents and others in recent months as many in that community have concluded that even with a sidewalk, they consider it too dangerous to allow their children to walk along Highway 26.

"I think you will discover the secondary project is a lot safer for our children," said Evan Garamendi, also a Calaveras Unified trustee.

Reusche said that seven years ago, when district officials initially agreed to the design, Jenny Lind Elementary was bulging with enrollment, resulting in a traffic jam every morning as parents tried to drive their children to the campus.

Back then, school officials hoped the safe route would ease that problem by allowing at least some children to walk from the start of the path near the Rancho Calaveras clubhouse at Highway 26 and Baldwin Street.

"It was the only thing we could do at that time," Reusche said.

Since then, enrollment has dropped.

The dispute surfaced at Tuesday's Board of Supervisors meeting because the board was scheduled to vote on a \$13,000 contract to complete engineering work required because of a change in state highway rules.

The vote was 4-1 in favor, with Supervisor Debbie Ponte opposed.

"Overall I'm just saddened we can't take this pool of money and do this the right way the first time," Ponte said.

Supervisor Chris Wright voiced the sentiment that prompted those in the majority to vote in favor.

"I think in the long run this is the best opportunity to get both projects completed," Wright said.

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