

## The mother of all traffic congestion

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From the Editor's Desk

By Buzz Eggleston

If there were only one good argument to make for any community to draft a viable plan for its future I would think it would be the sign-cluttered intersection of Highways 12 and 26 in Valley Springs.

It's an intersection heatedly debated by townsfolk and government officials right now, the one some people tenderly refer to as the heart of Valley Springs. The question is traffic.

Twice a day for eight or nine months out of every year the crossing becomes a bottleneck. Cars back up like paparazzi at a Lindsay Lohan arraignment.

The daily bouts of congestion are not caused by some pampered celebrity, though. They are simply because school is in session and because the people who plan where schools and roads are going to be built and those who plan where housing is going to be built sometimes don't put those thoughts together at the same time.

The schools are on the north side of Highway 12, on one side of the bottleneck. Nearly all of the housing is in sprawling subdivisions and ranchettes on the other side, waves of houses that flank a corridor called Highway 26 that eventually leads to Stockton.

Valley Springs Elementary School is a short walk from the intersection. It was already there in 1974, when the community's first development plan was written. Toyon Middle School is farther east on Highway 12 and it came later. Calaveras High School is miles away in San Andreas. Many moms or dads dropping off students actually make trips, to school and then back home, twice a day.

Short of moving the schools, bypassing the intersection or rebuilding it, there's no ready fix for the traffic problem.

Better planning might have helped, but how could a Valley Springs community plan drafted in the 1970s have envisioned the housing that would be built along Highway 26 and the impact it would have on the small town up the road?

In fact, the 1974 plan that supposedly was to guide Valley Springs development foresaw just the opposite direction in housing development. "Expansion of single-family homes should be to the north and east, a relatively level area easily served by water and sewer," it said.

Sometimes plans don't work.

As growth occurred over the past 36 years, the implications of future traffic problems involving the schools should have been foreseeable. Not surprisingly, little was done about it. It wasn't until the past decade that a controversial road improvement fee was imposed on new development. The fee recognizes that traffic problems are growing and that it will take money to fix them.

The highways intersection was hardly mentioned in the eight-page community plan adopted in 1974. "Valley Springs has room for planned growth instead of sprawl," the drafters of that 1974 document wrote in a charmingly casual style not seen in many government documents today. They apparently didn't realize that it actually would prove to have room for both.

Today what many consider burdensome regulations of government – building permits, zoning, environmental impact reports, general plans, and such – complement community plans by forcing people to think about the implications of housing, other forms of construction, roads, water and sewers before they begin building. I tend to think of these as positive contributions to the social good while others can be heard saying that they are a draconian infringement on "property rights."

A facet of Calaveras County's present general plan is that it Balkanized the county's towns, asking residents of those communities to draft their own plans as if they were islands unaffected by the sea around them. That has merit, but it created a false sense of sovereignty, an insular point of view that stifled debate about the issues that frame their commonality and the impact of the larger community. That same formula is being applied to a new, updated general plan being written now. We would be wise to remember we don't live on islands. The intersection of Highways 12 and 26 offers some hope that we can forge agreement among people who don't tend to agree with each other much of the time. But it's a slim hope. Instead of lighted traffic signals or a dreaded roundabout, planners have been asked to go back to the drawing table and propose a simpler idea, a short-term solution to a problem that is very local and at the same time very widespread.

It'll be interesting to see how that turns out, whether compromise can yield a breakthrough idea or whether we'll be stuck in traffic for many years to come.

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