

MOTHER LODE ROAD DEAL FALLS APART

WORK ON WAGON TRAIL IN JEOPARDY

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SAN ANDREAS - Funding for a \$56 million straightening of the Wagon Trail section of Highway 4 between Copperopolis and Angels Camp is in jeopardy after a three-county agreement to cooperate on highway funding collapsed this week.

Wednesday the Amador Transportation Commission voted to withdraw from its agreement to cooperate with Calaveras and Alpine counties. By cooperating on planning and pooling certain state highway funds, the three counties were able to finish big projects more quickly and more easily obtain additional funding from both the state and federal governments, officials say.

The deal killed this week was known as MOU II, because it was the second long-term memorandum of understanding for the three counties.

Friday, members of the Calaveras Council of Governments board were mourning the change.

"This is an act of incredible bad faith," said Tom Tryon, a member of the Council of Governments and also a Calaveras County supervisor.

A previous agreement by the three counties, known as MOU I, had helped build roughly \$100 million in major highway bypass projects in Sutter Creek and Angels Camp in the past decade.

Under MOU I, Amador County got to build its \$40 million bypass first. Representatives of the counties agreed that under MOU II, Calaveras would get to go first.

An Amador County elected official said he and his colleagues balked, however, at the price tag for the Wagon Trail project.

"It just did not appear to be the best business decision for Amador County to continue in MOU II," said Richard Forster, a member of the Amador Transportation Commission and also an Amador County supervisor.

Forster noted that a proposed bypass around Pine Grove on Highway 88 in Amador County was originally part of MOU II and would have been of roughly the same magnitude as the Wagon Trail project.

But the Pine Grove project has been downsized to improvements that mean it has a smaller price tag and no longer qualifies for some types of highway funding that can only go to projects that increase capacity.

Still, Calaveras officials said there were willing to work out a compromise that would have ensured Amador benefited equally from MOU II.

Calaveras County Supervisor Gary Tofanelli, also a member of the Calaveras Council of Governments board, was part of negotiations in recent weeks to save the agreement.

Tofanelli said Calaveras leaders offered a number of arrangements, including allowing Amador to go first again with its projects. "Every time we came close, it was a different issue," Tofanelli said.

Calaveras County Public Works Director Tom Garcia said he still plans to have the Wagon Trail design done and right of way purchased so the project will be "shovel ready" by 2016.

After that, however, it is anyone's guess how long it might take to pay for the actual construction. Garcia said the breakup of the three-county deal immediately puts at risk \$20 million in state funding and will also make it harder to seek other funding in the future.

"It puts a huge wrench in our ability to get funding for this project," Garcia said.

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History of Lode road cooperation

Here's a timeline of the rise and fall of cooperation on highway funding among three mountain counties:

1996: Amador and Calaveras counties sign a memorandum of understanding that they will pool certain state highway funds to speed completion of big projects.

1997: Alpine County joins the MOU.

October 2004: A passing lane on Highway 4 near Arnold is completed through agreement funding.

February 2007: The Highway 49 Bypass around Sutter Creek, in Amador County, is completed at a cost of \$40 million, \$8 million more than expected.

September 2008: The three counties agree to a second memorandum of understanding under which they will continue cooperating for another decade.

July 2009: The Angels Camp Bypass in Calaveras County, a \$61.5 million section added to Highway 4, is opened for use. It is also more than originally estimated and is the most expensive project funded through the first three-county MOU.

November 2011: Amador County withdraws from the second MOU.

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