

Supes balk at approving nearly \$2 mil more for SR4 work

By Nick Baptista / The Valley Springs News / September 27, 2024

Requests for additional funds to continue work on the State Route 4 “Wagon Trail” Realignment Project hit a roadblock at Tuesday’s meeting of the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors.

Cost overruns have plagued the 3.2-mile project that was expected to cost \$24 million, but now has a price tag in the neighborhood of \$53 million.

Up for board consideration at the meeting was a \$1.25 million change order to fund construction through the end of this year and a \$578,262.81 increase in funding to Dewberry Engineers Inc., the project management team.

The board on separate 4-1 votes balked at the requests and continued both items for consideration at an Oct. 8 meeting. Board members expressed they would like to see more details in the meantime before making a decision. District 4 Supervisor Amanda Folendorf was the lone supervisors to vote against the motions.

The board as recently as Sept. 10 approved a \$2.1 million change order for the Sukut Construction, the contractor on the job.

Sukut has already gone over that amount by \$94,631, according to a staff report to the board, and the latest change order calls for the contractor to complete another 51,000 cubic yards of roadway excavation before the end of the 2024 construction season.

The staff report said another change order will be submitted in 2025 and the cost for that work is estimated at \$375,000.

District 1 Supervisor Gary Tofanelli said “everything is still an estimate” and questioned whether the latest change order will be enough to fund construction through the end of 2024.

“The project management team believes the hardest and the most expensive excavation is in the rear view mirror now,” said Howard Zabell of Dewberry Engineers Inc. and the project manager.

If the change order is not approved by the board, Interim Public Works Director Craig Pedro said its likely the contractor would pull off the job.

“This is the last major piece to finish this thing,” Pedro said. He called for the board to continue on course and get as much work done this construction season, which would lessen what work needs to be done in 2025.

In addition, the county will be going before the California Transportation Commission next month seeking an extension of the project and additional funding to cover the unanticipated costs.

District 3 Supervisor Martin Huberty cautioned against stopping work.

“I don’t see any way out,” Huberty said, while stopping it now will only cost the county more in the future.

In the meantime, District 5 Supervisor Benjamin Stopper said he wanted to see more detailed costs instead of estimates.

The nearly \$600,000 more to Dewberry was driven by Native American cultural artifacts found within the construction site.

Christopher Buttner, publisher of Calaveras2024-Election.com said the board was spending money “like drunken sailors” and putting the county at risk of bankruptcy. He said a forensic audit of the project should be taken before any more money is spent.

Al Segalla of the Calaveras Taxpayers Association questioned why the county was building a highway for Caltrans.

Stopper said that decision was made by a previous Board of Supervisors back in 2014 or 2015.

Folendorf asked whether more cultural artifacts will be uncovered between now and the end of construction.

“One thing we have going in our favor is we’re running out of real estate to turn the dirt on and that’s when we find these things,” Pedro said. “Seriously, there’s not a lot of virgin ground left to turn.”

Dewberry’s request includes \$325,000 for tribal monitoring and another \$184,000 for project management services.

Construction of Phase 1 of the Wagon Trail project from Bonanza Mine Way to Appaloosa Road west of Angels Camp began in January of 2022. Phase 2, which includes work from Appaloosa Road for approximately 3 miles eastward toward Angels Camp, began in 2022 with the award of a design contract. Design and right-of-way work for this phase should be completed in 2026 with construction beginning sometime after.

Correction: The Sept. 13 edition of The News said \$10 million was being spent to construct a “Mechanically Stabilized Earth” retaining wall to protect Native American artifacts in the construction area. The actual cost is \$6 million. The News regrets the error.