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Interstate 5 fee is painful but necessary

Should local home builders and buyers be on the hook for improving our interstate highway?

They might not have a choice.

Regional road planners are working to persuade city and county governments from Corning to Shasta Lake to impose an impact fee, likely \$1,000 to \$2,000 per new single-family house, to help widen Interstate 5 as the region's population and traffic grow.

Six lanes will be needed, they argue, or else gridlock will stymie travel, especially as southern Shasta County and Tehama County grow and new residents use I-5 to reach jobs or shopping centers.

That's all well and good, but isn't I-5 a federal highway maintained by the state Department of Transportation? Why does Anderson have to pitch in for new lanes?

In part, it's because even though I-5 runs from San Diego to Seattle, traffic tie-ups are a local problem. Dan Little, head of the Shasta County Regional Transportation Planning Agency, says up to 80 percent of rush-hour traffic on the freeway is local. That makes it, in the eyes of Caltrans and the feds, our problem.

The impact fees, as envisioned, would cover only about 20 percent of the cost of widening I-5. That local match, though, is essential to convincing higher authorities of the project's importance, Little said. (Still, it's no guarantee, especially for rural areas with little political clout: Mendocino County has for years been planning a Highway 101 bypass around Willits, and has raised about half the \$360 million cost. State transportation officials originally suggested funding the rest out of the recent highway bond -- until California's urban areas twisted enough arms to pay for their own priorities.)

Planning for I-5's growth is sound long-term thinking, but that virtue is partly inspired by Caltrans' increasingly hard-nosed attitude. Last year the agency threatened to sue Tehama County for approving the Sun City retirement community without doing enough to ease the resulting traffic. State officials ultimately didn't pull the trigger, but next time things might not end so amicably.

And the only thing worse than paying for new freeways now is paying for them later. In the commuter-choked suburbs of Sacramento, where growth has far outrun the roads' capacity, traffic fees run as high as \$37,000 per house.

A regional impact fee might be the worst solution to I-5's problems -- except for all the others.



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