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Article published Apr 26, 2006

Calaveras board considering tax for road projects

SAN ANDREAS - Calaveras County supervisors squirmed Monday but managed to agree that they should somehow find a way to persuade county voters to pay for more than \$85million in desperately needed road and highway fixes.

The board said during a study session with staff from the Public Works Department that the department should make plans to hire a consultant to study the problem and figure out whether Calaveras voters would be most likely to support a sales tax, a parcel tax, a gasoline tax or some other tax to improve and maintain roads.

Supervisors are caught between residents frustrated with poor roads, many of whom want new development to pay much of the cost, and real estate industry representatives, who say they already are paying plenty toward road costs - especially on commercial properties.

Meanwhile, the county also suffers from the need to replace its jail and modernize or build other infrastructure, including parks - something that would require politicians to ask voters to tax themselves possibly hundreds of dollars a year.

Board of Supervisors Chairwoman Merita Callaway urged public-works staff to consider all the county's infrastructure needs when hiring a consultant to come up with a proposal for funding roads.

"As long as you have to eat the dill pickle, you might as well eat the whole thing," Callaway said.

Two years ago, after much anguished debate, supervisors put a "road impact mitigation" fee of \$3,300 per home on new construction. The county levies fees on new commercial construction, too. Those fees are supposed to pay new development's share of increased traffic over the next 20 years or so, or about \$38million.

The problem is that the total cost of road upgrades and repairs in that time will be more like \$157million. Even with state road money, there is an \$85million gap, and the county's own rules require county officials to find a way to pay it.

Lloyd Griffin of the Calaveras County Association of Realtors said his group supported the road impact mitigation fee placed on development two years ago on the understanding that county leaders promptly would find a way to fund all the road improvements needed.

"I think a sales tax is probably the most logical direction to go," Griffin said.

Supervisors, however, noted that the past several attempts to increase the county's hotel-room tax - a tax that for the most part isn't paid by county residents - have been defeated by county voters.

Supervisor Steve Wilensky said his district in particular voted heavily against the hotel tax increase. He believes it was because the tax didn't promise any benefits in his district.

"They want to see specifics for what they get," Wilensky said.

And some residents feel they already are getting far less than they are paying for.

At one point during the study session, Callaway asked Alice Raine, head of the road committee for the Rancho Calaveras subdivision, if voters there would increase their assessment to speed improvements on nearby Highway 26.

"Not until we get our roads fixed," Raine said, noting damage to subdivision streets caused when heavy trucks come through due to detours or to get to construction sites.

Supervisors also directed staff to plan for future study sessions on the list of roads set for widening, repairs or improvements.

Trimming that list could help reduce the total price tag in coming decades. Monday's session was an informal discussion. Any action by the board will have to take place during an agenda meeting.

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