



'Fix Five' fee will get ahead of growth curve

The north state calmly lags behind many California trends. Whether it's immigration, growth, fashion or the latest L.A. food craze, we're often behind the times -- and happily so.

One upside to our slow pace is that we can watch the mistakes the rest of the state makes and, if we're smart, avoid them.

North state transportation planners are trying to dodge the most jaw-grinding side-effect of growth -- traffic gridlock -- with a plan to start paying for the widening of Interstate 5 to three lanes. The "Fix Five" project would impose an impact fee on new houses, shops and offices from Corning to Shasta Lake.

The cost? Fees start at about \$1,700 for a one-family house in Shasta County and run up to the neighborhood of half a million dollars for a big-box store.

The slumping real estate market makes it a poor time to impose new fees on construction, but we need to face the effects of growth now. The alternative is to dither until we're stuck in daily traffic jams. Then the costs -- in drivers' lost time and taxpayers' money, not to mention future fees on developers -- will only be higher.

On its face, the best argument against imposing a local fee to improve I-5 is that the interstate highway is a federal and state responsibility.

It's the road Oregonians drive to Disneyland, Californians take to the Portland Rose Festival, and truckers use to transport everything from scrap metal to silicon wafers up and down the West Coast. Why should a homebuilder in Shasta Lake shoulder the cost of a third lane?

Sadly, gridlock is a local problem. The flow of truckers and tourists holds fairly steady along I-5 through the north state, but congestion predictably peaks in our cities. And as those cities grow, the freeway must expand to make room for local commuters. That's why I-5 stretches as wide as 22 lanes in Orange County.

In any case, the fees are not designed to cover the full cost of widening I-5. The "Fix Five" fee would cover half the cost of improvements in Shasta County and one-third in Tehama County. The local money would match state and federal grants to speed widening as growth occurs. Otherwise, we could wait decades for vital improvements.

Other parts of California have tried that. And the results are on daily display an easy drive to our south in the Vacaville-Fairfield area or in the booming Sacramento suburbs. In both places, population growth sped far ahead of the road capacity, and the result is the chronic gridlock that makes people want to live in the north state.

The Shasta County Regional Transportation Planning Agency board will put the Fix Five program to a vote Tuesday. Then, to take effect, it needs the approval of councilors and supervisors in five cities and

two counties.

The fees are far from popular in some quarters, but those decision makers need to think about the long-term effects of doing nothing -- and they should vote for Fix Five.



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