



## STATE BUDGET CRISIS BAD NEWS FOR LOCAL TRANSPORTATION PROJECTS

I hope everyone had a great holiday because 2003 is not starting out well. In fact, it is downright grizzly.

Despite the Mayor of San Diego's best effort to put on a happy face during his State of the City sermon last Monday, he had to feel the bottom dropping out from beneath his feet as the aftershocks radiating from the state's gargantuan \$35 billion deficit earthquake hit home.

To most people living in our heavenly part of the world, the bad news from Sacramento is just a headline without a byline—who would want to sign the local infrastructure obituary that is coming, soon.

That dirty job falls on the City Manager, whose budget report this cycle is being ghost written by Stephen King. The County financial picture is pure Dorian Gray.

Until this year, our area has been relatively immune from budget crisis impacts largely because development fees have paid for new roads, sewers, libraries, school construction, and through exactions and restrictions, even open space. It has been sweet dreams.

But this year, the state budget crisis will trickle down on everyone's parade. There is enough pain to rain on just about any pet project wished for or real.

Although education and social services have taken the biggest hit because they are the largest part of the state budget, transportation funding is vanishing as quickly as the governor can vacuum it up and into the state's general fund bottomless pit.

The Governor has already taken back his Y2000 transportation gift to local areas, including as much as \$25 million for SR56, threatening every project in process or planned in San Diego, from the I-805 widening project to bus service.

This month, regional transportation agencies will be reprioritizing and axing projects to fit this new lean world. It will not be pretty.

And one of the safest bets is that direct connectors at the west end of SR56 will meet the grim reaper given their expense and tepid Caltrans interest unless this community gets the regional fiscal picture before its too late.

Community leadership traditionally focuses on issues close to home—who else cares about keeping the grass growing and the traffic flowing except our community planning groups and town councils.

But, Community Planning Board leaders must add to their New Years resolution list a renewed and meaningful

engagement with regional planning agencies like SANDAG and the new Airport Authority, state legislators and county supervisors, water and utility boards, and state conservation agencies.

Failure to pay attention to decisions under consideration right now within public agencies and interest groups risks allowing our communities to become victims to increased fees, diminishing services and quick fix solutions like bringing in big-box retail for the sales tax revenues or selling off public lands.

The Carmel Valley Planning Board, in creating a Regional Issues Subcommittee early on, understood the need to monitor and interface with regional government agencies and interest groups to get things done when the issues revolved around saving open space.

Today, this subcommittee ought to be worrying a lot about what the budget crisis means in terms of infrastructure and services of all kinds to this area. For example, they should conclude that given the budget circumstances, it is foolhardy to pursue a \$137 million SR56 connector project when a \$50 million one would do.

But, over the past several years, the Carmel Valley Regional Issues subcommittee has strayed from its original mandate, functioning more as a first review for individual building projects that eventually go before the full board than a regional policy and advocacy body.

Torrey Hills Chair Kathryn Burton and former Torrey Pines planning board chair Bob Lewis favor forming a regional policy group made up of elected planning board members from each of the planning areas: Torrey Pines, Torrey Hills, Del Mar Mesa and Carmel Valley.

Going where no one has dared gone before, they might also entertain the idea of extending this idea to an SR56 corridor group, including Rancho Penasquitos and Torrey Highlands, because sooner or later we will all be joined at the hip when SR56 finally makes its debut.

Such a group could tackle the nightmarish consequences of the transportation budget fiasco if they could agree on goals for SR56 completion, transit options, traffic mitigation, transit oriented land use and The Airport, among scores of other looming issues sure to affect the health of our communities.

With San Diego's ghost of a budget, the seemingly endless financial creativity of public officials to fund infrastructure might be coming to an end. And that will make 2003 a very scary year.