



PROPOSITION 51 SURPRISE: SR56 TRAFFIC RELIEF

Much to the surprise of community leaders along the State Route 56 corridor, a little-known state-wide ballot measure on the November ballot that has recently suffered a spate of bad press in Northern California would fund the missing northbound connectors from State Route 56 to I5.

Supported and financed by an unusual variety of interests, Proposition 51, called the Traffic Congestion Relief and Safe School Bus Act by its sponsor, the Planning and Conservation League, proposes to carve out 30 percent of car sales tax revenues from the state's general fund to pay for a long shopping list of environmental and traffic relief projects.

What is unusual about the measure is the sponsor's fund raising scheme. Interest groups advocating a reasonable and environmental friendly infrastructure project could insert one into the initiative by contributing campaign funds in proportion to the cost of the project—which explains the odd admixture of projects and groups supporting Proposition 51, from big developers and the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce to the Sierra Club California and the Trust for Public Lands.

Besides the SR56 connector project, in San Diego the San Dieguito River Valley Conservancy would receive about \$1 million and the San Diego River Valley-Lakeside Conservancy almost \$4 million for parkland acquisition. The San Diego Bicycle Coalition hopes that bicycle infrastructure projects here would benefit from a \$60 million fund created by the measure over ten years.

Opponents of Proposition 51 stepped out early this month, decrying the initiative as ballot box budgeting and a way for supporters of orphan transportation and conservation projects to sidestep the usual bureaucratic and political channels that can hold-up funding for years or forever by buying their projects onto a ballot measure.

No matter how curious the funding mechanism or how mysterious the campaign, for neighborhoods along the SR56 corridor, the ballot measure is likely the last and only chance for financing the missing connector project left out of plans for this vital connection between I5 and I15 in spite of the best efforts of the Carmel Valley Planning Board and SR56 Task Force over the past decade.

Like many other projects contained in Proposition 51, the SR56 connector project has traditionally come up against antipathy from the state's transportation agency Caltrans, apathy from the regional transportation funding decision making body SANDAG, and only sympathy from local public officials who have no money to spend.

That is because freeway to freeway connectors are expensive and usually only protect local neighborhoods from the daunting traffic impacts of cars seeking alternative routes and commuters

from Excedrin headaches. In this case, the missing connectors create a traffic bottleneck with repercussions to the entire freeway system.

By Caltrans own admission during a painful Value Analysis Study undertaken with community leaders last year in an attempt to resuscitate the still unborn project, the agency considers local streets perfectly adequate to handle cars from out east seeking a way to head north on I5 for the next twenty years.

But, the impacts of these missing connectors go well beyond the future traffic soaked neighborhoods of Carmel Valley or road raging commuters stacked up at rush hours, because if they are not built, smart growth planning in Northern San Diego will morph into the kind of dumb growth not seen since the Mira Mesa sprawl scenario of the 1970's.

In 1998, the west end connector project took on a regional importance when voters passed Proposition M and K allowing development of 10,000 acres between Carmel Valley and Rancho Penasquitos only if the new communities adhered to strict smart growth guidelines and that traffic impacts would be mitigated by finishing SR56, complete with northbound connectors.

The planning guidelines for one new community, Pacific Highlands Ranch, included the preservation and rehabilitation of 2000 acres of open space, 15 miles of interconnected equestrian, hiking and biking trails and a village style retail center with a library and performing arts center to be paid for by the building fees generated from each of 4900 new homes.

Proposition M also mandated that only 1900 homes could be built in Pacific Highlands Ranch before SR56 is finished. Without the fees expected from the rest of the homes at build out, smart growth amenities like public buildings, open space and recreational parks, regional trails and even the village center core will remain on paper.

And so, stuck with a voter approved plan and a transportation project with so much regional significance but with so few prospects for funding, the developer of Pacific Highlands Ranch, Pardee Homes, quietly joined the Proposition 51 campaign, putting the SR56 project on the list and their money on the line.

There is a certain cynicism about the stealth-like feel of the Proposition 51 campaign that is bound to turn some voters off—including many community leaders around here who were left out of the loop until the cat leapt out of the bag via a nasty Associated Press story appearing in several upstate newspapers.

But, arcane campaign strategy aside, communities along the SR56 corridor and the 200,000 San Diego commuters a day traversing its six mile reach have a lot riding on Proposition 51.