



MY BEST SHOT

by Lisa Ross

www.lisaross.com

CALTRANS LOBS BOMB FOR HOLIDAYS

Something in gold would be nice for Christmas, Chanukah or Kwanzaa. And that's what we got from Caltrans this week, a solid gold-plated SR56/I-5 direct connector project that they say will cost \$115 million in today's dollars—bureaucratic code for it'll be a hot day in the Arctic before this thing happens, kids.

This "thing" happens to be the difference between a complete SR56 project and a dysfunctional east-to-west highway; the difference between smart growth communities east of Carmel Valley or more bedroom neighborhoods without a town center and library; and the difference between quiet neighborhood streets or rush hour traffic filtering through Carmel Valley seeking a way to head north on I-5.

The release of the report, a year late, outlining the engineering standards and costs for both a southbound and northbound direct connection from SR56 to I-5, was anticlimactic for SR56 gadflies. Bits and pieces of the grisly details had leaked out over the past two months while agency elves hammered away, sending the dog-eared document up, down and around the SANDAG and Caltrans bureaucracy.

For the bureaucratically challenged, a Project Study Report (PSR) is required before regional agencies can consider funding a transportation project. Caltrans officials, traditional Grinches about these connectors since 1992 when the Carmel Valley Planning Board began yelling about this hole in the SR56 plans, were in no hurry to complete the task, nor shy about ratcheting the project up, up and away into the oh-no zone.

The PSR's suggestions will be as welcome as a pair of alpaca socks under the tree. With more padding than on a line backer at the Holiday Bowl, the study includes a horrific \$60 million design for the south to east connection that resembles a soaring Coney Island roller coaster, \$10 million to move a fiber optic cable, and unspecified dollars for a new I-5 lane in addition to the northbound connector that everyone really wants.

This Caltrans' "bah humbugging" is no secret. Always pragmatists, Caltrans considers miles of highway a lot sexier and saleable than connectors that cover less ground but protect and serve communities and

commuters. The San Diego region is home to 14 missing freeway-to-freeway connectors. And so, while the study says that traffic demand warrants the northbound connectors, the threatened impacts are not enough to excite Caltrans into action.

I suppose we should rejoice in the agency's earnest desire to spend state transportation dollars well and cost-effectively, even if doing so comes at the expense of property values that contribute a small piece of the tax revenues that pay their bills.

After all, this is the state agency that recently spent \$19.4 million renovating 39 historic homes it owns in LA, with another 50 houses requiring similar attention. These homes sit in the right-of-way for a four-decade-old pipe dream of a \$1.4 billion Long Beach Freeway extension that would rip through the bucolic neighborhood of South Pasadena, if anyone ever lets them.

And that's why the most disturbing aspect of west end SR56 study is that the project is not broken down into fundable parts, nor are project alternatives as they were in a similar study for the connectors at I-15. Clearly, a value analysis study must start immediately, a process that Caltrans has used effectively on other projects, including one conducted last year on the northbound SR56 to I-15 connectors.

Value analysis allows a multi-disciplined team of engineers and project stakeholders to look for innovative solutions in design and cost, and according to a Caltrans description, serves to break down such bad influences as "negative attitudes," "habitual thinking," "poor human relations" and regulatory rigidity that might produce an overly hormonal and costly project like the one we are seeing here.

Certainly, the \$60 million south to east connector should be first on the chopping block. Unlike the northbound connector, the PSR indicates that traffic demand will not meet threshold requirements for at least a decade. A dash of innovative thinking might produce a low-tech, lower cost solution. And, it is also not clear why a new lane on I-5, a federal highway, should be charged to this state and locally funded project.

Instead of dancing sugarplums, this holiday brings visions of Caltrans officials, dressed like Boris Badenov's, elbowing Santa Claus aside to throw the SR56 project study bomb down Carmel Valley and Del Mar chimneys. To Caltrans: thanks for the present—now let's get on with the show.