

Sunday, June 9, 2013

San Francisco Chronicle

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Old homes in new road's way

Planned realignment of South Lake Tahoe corridor could mean bulldozing for about 75 property owners

By Peter Fimrite

SOUTH LAKE TAHOE — Things have pretty much remained the same in the 13 years

Gary Miller has lived on Moss Road here, but he can hear quiet rumblings of future change and he doesn't like the sound.

Miller, 60, is one of about 75 property owners whose homes might have to be bulldozed if a plan goes through to reroute Highway 50 around a perpetu-

ally gridlocked stretch on the south shore of the lake, on the California-Nevada border where the Heavenly ski resort and popular casinos are located.

The plan by the Tahoe Transportation District would turn a 1.1-mile section of the current

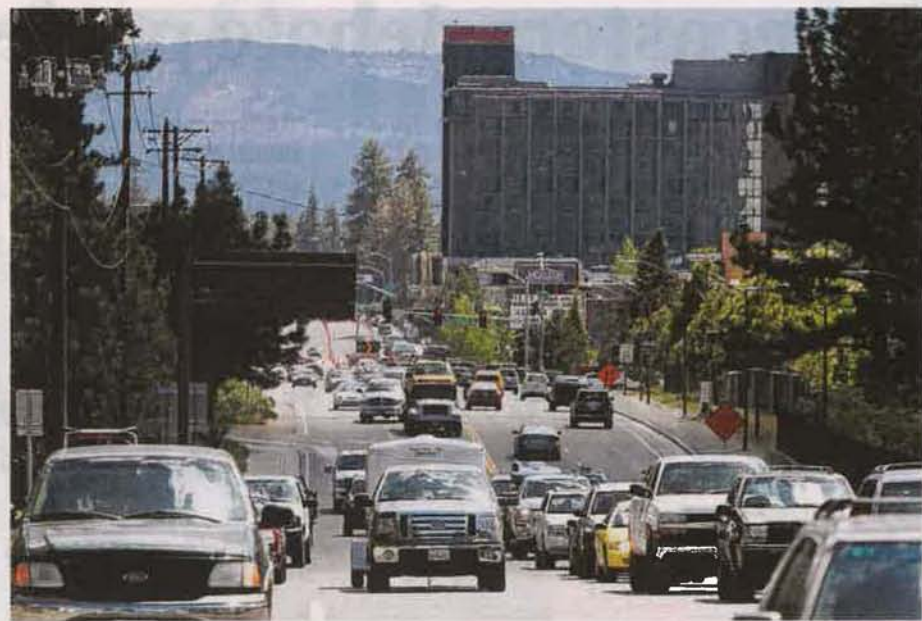
highway, from Pioneer Trail in California to Lake Parkway in Nevada, into a local "main street." The realignment would allow for environmentally sustainable landscaping, a pedestrian-friendly promenade, a bicycle trail and the

Tahoe continues on A17

FROM THE COVER



Artist renderings of the proposal that the transportation district says would increase retail sales and provide more pedestrian and bicycle access.



A view from Stateline, Nev., looking down Highway 50 toward South Lake Tahoe. Plans call for turning a busy 1.1-mile stretch into a local "main street."

Old homes in way of new road

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kind of transit options local, state and regional officials and business leaders have been clamoring for in the casino corridor for decades.

The problem is that the planned "loop road" replacing the highway would have to be built through at least one neighborhood. That would mean, depending on which alignment is eventually chosen, that the brick-lined cabin Miller's grandfather bought in 1952 could be flattened along with dozens of other homes and businesses in the woody community.

"I don't see how ruining another neighborhood to build another highway so they can build a pedestrian walkway makes sense," Miller said. "These houses have been here for a long time and there are hundreds of trees, too, that would have to be removed. It's a waste of money."

Not so, say Tahoe Transportation District officials, who recently released an economic analysis that shows how bypassing Highway 50 through town would increase retail sales along the corridor by between \$16 million and \$25 million annually.

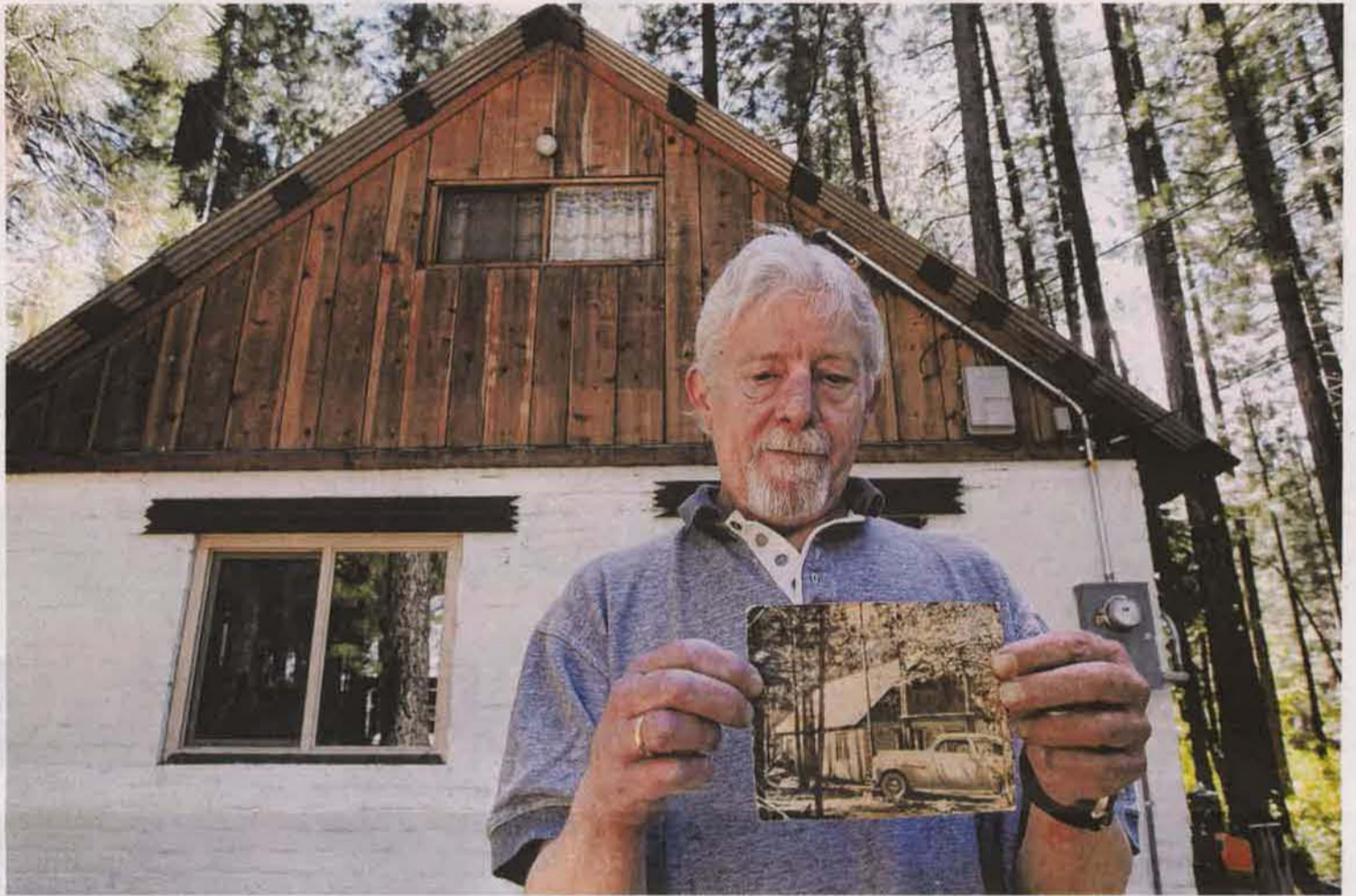
"Highway 50 now bifurcates the whole town and even cuts off access to the lake. It is an impediment to other modes of transportation, especially bicycle and pedestrian traffic, which cannot move through the area," said Alfred Knotts, the project manager for the district. "Seventy percent of the traffic on Highway 50 through the corridor is through traffic, including a lot of freight traffic. The goal of the project is to create a local street for visitors and provide more pedestrian and bicycle access."

Idea dates to 1980

It is not a new idea. A loop road around the south shore casinos was first proposed around 1980, but it never got the support it needed. It had been languishing on the back burner for two decades until 2009 when the transportation district decided to look at it again. The district has outlined four realignment alternatives, two of which would place Highway 50 on a local road called Lake Parkway. Another option would put only west-bound traffic on Lake Parkway and make the existing highway one-way heading east. The fourth option would leave Highway 50 alone and build an elevated promenade, or skywalk, overhead.

A bicycle trail would be built separately, allowing people to ride from the beaches to the casinos and to eventually connect to a bikeway circling the lake. A planned cross-lake ferry would service the entire area, providing swift service to Tahoe City and the North Shore, said Carl Hasty, the transportation district manager.

"Tahoe has been very car oriented, and the result has been that we don't have a built environment that's comparable to our natural environment," he said. "This plan will create a more attractive place that can better capture business and also spur economic development."



Photos by Michael Macor / The Chronicle

Gary Miller stands in front of his Moss Road home with an old photo of it. It has been in his family since the early 1950s.



Homeowner Joyce Lenstrom and tenant Mike Fraley were shocked to hear they may lose their homes if the "loop road" to replace the highway ends up coming through their neighborhood.

The proposed Lake Parkway route could impact neighborhoods along Moss, Echo, Fern and Montreal roads, depending on which side of the Pioneer Trail intersection planners decide to start the highway. The plan would provide the property owners with more modern housing and assistance moving. Whatever they do, it'll likely involve a fight.

"I don't want to move," said Mahendra "Baba" Patel, the owner of the 15-room Thunderchief Inn, which would be directly in the path of the new highway alignment on Echo Road. "I could never find this nice of a property if I went to another place, so I don't want to sell."

Low-income renters affected

Several longtime businesses along Highway 50, including Naked Fish Sushi & Lounge and the Tahoe Bottle Shop, are likely to be impacted. Critics also point out that most of the residents who would be displaced are low-income and minority renters. Several

buildings in the firing line are, in fact, run-down motels that rent rooms for as low as \$28 or are being used for what essentially is tenement housing. Most of the homes are old summer cabins.

Hasty said there are too many low-rent rooms on the South Shore, which drives down prices everywhere. Economic redevelopment, he said, is one of the primary selling points of the realignment plan, the costs of which have not yet been determined.

That's a problem for Joyce Lenstrom, 83, who built her wood-frame cabin on Moss Road nearly 30 years ago and believes developers are trying to turn what was once a charming middle-income community into a pretentious resort town.

"I like Tahoe like it was," she said. "It was cute and original, with a lot of older houses and unique-looking motels."

It is a problem many communities are facing as city planners attempt to control congestion, revitalize run-down areas and draw people

back to their downtowns.

The South Shore region of Lake Tahoe is, in many respects, still suffering from the effects of massive home and commercial construction from the 1950s through the 1970s. About 75 percent of Tahoe marshlands and 50 percent of the meadow habitat was altered during the building boom. The buildings, asphalt, automobile pollution and lack of proper drainage were blamed by environmentalists for sending pollutants flowing into the once-pristine lake, causing algae buildup and drastically reducing water clarity over the past 40 years.

Improving environment

More than 50 public and private organizations, led by the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency and the Tahoe Conservancy, have joined forces over the past decade to address the problem, creating the Lake Tahoe Environmental Improvement Program.

Over the past 15 years, more than \$1 billion has been spent

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Carl Hasty, manager, Tahoe Transportation District

on 266 restoration projects around the lake, from new roads and drainage to runoff basins.

More than 3,000 acres of private property have been purchased for open space and public use, 739 acres of wetlands have been restored, 374 acres of denuded land have been revegetated, and public pathways and mass transportation have been improved, according to regional planning officials.

The new mantra in Tahoe and everywhere else in California is transit-oriented development — or the creation of communities with built-in alternatives to the automobile. It is, said Hasty, what is needed on the South Shore even if some residents have to be displaced.

"I think people are coming to the realization that this is an opportunity and the benefits can outweigh the impacts," he said. "This is one major piece that fits into a much larger vision for the region."

The alternatives must still go through an environmental review, which is expected to take at least 16 months, before a preferred alternative can be chosen. Final approval by the transportation district, the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency and Federal Highway Administration is not expected for another two or three years.

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