



This story is taken from [Special Projects](#) at [sacbee.com](#).

Grappling With Growth: Building boom worsens Highway 50 headaches

HIGHWAY 50: It used to be simply a scenic route to Lake Tahoe. Now, traffic is getting worse and worse. In Folsom, sewer spill

By Stuart Leavenworth -- Bee Staff Writer - (*Published December 9, 2001*)

Stuck in the driver's seat for 15 years, David Rice watched Highway 50 change from a smooth-sailing freeway to a roiling, grinding sea of traffic that made him feel like a sardine in his Toyota tin can.

Finally, last September, Rice hit the ejector button. Fed up with a one-way commute that had jumped from 30 to 90 minutes, Rice moved his family from Shingle Springs to Davis. He now rides Amtrak to his job in downtown Sacramento.

"I just couldn't stand the thought of doing it another year, much less 15," said Rice, whose commute now takes 18 minutes. "There was so much development up and down the corridor; I saw the writing on the wall."

Unfortunately for thousands of other commuters in the Sacramento area, there is no easy escape from the region's budding transportation crisis. Decades of shortsighted planning are creating traffic gridlock as the region spreads out and adds a half million people a decade. Cities and counties continue to approve new subdivisions with little access to public transit, funneling more motorists onto a highway network that has changed little since the 1970s.

Nowhere is this more evident than on Highway 50, where four local governments have their own road maps for growth, none of which jibes with the others.

"There's no doubt that we are headed toward a meltdown of mobility," said David Mogavero, an architect and president of the Environmental Council of Sacramento. "We've got localities competing instead of cooperating. We've got the federal government threatening to pull our transportation funds because our air quality is so bad."

Sacramento's traffic congestion didn't occur overnight and it isn't the only consequence of the region's robust, but often mismanaged, growth. In Folsom, taxpayers are paying the price for an overloaded sewage system. Along the Highway 50 corridor, government agencies are allowing creeks to be fouled, filled and forgotten -- threatening the American River.

But from Lincoln to Laguna, traffic is a daily headache for anyone who commutes, bikes, owns a business or tries to cross a busy street. And according to a months-long review by The Bee, the area's 19 local governments are contributing to this transportation squeeze with decisions that tend to favor special interests over the region's long-term needs.

Wary of upsetting neighborhood activists, local leaders have killed some long-planned projects, such as a highway bypass connecting Highway 50 with Interstate 80. At the same time, they've resisted any form of regional land-use planning, mindful of developers who help finance their political campaigns.

As a result:

* Cities and counties continue to approve shopping centers, subdivisions and office parks in a piecemeal fashion, with little regard for how they will add to congestion. Along Highway 50, for instance, local governments have plans for 53,000 more homes in coming years, even though their traffic engineers say such development will overload the freeway.

* Despite their stated support for light rail and buses, city and county officials often approve development that doesn't complement -- and even hurts -- public transit. In the past eight years, Sacramento city and county officials approved three Home Depots near rail stations, even though people buying lumber and power tools rarely use transit for such purchases.

* Even with talk of "regional cooperation," local governments continue to bicker over basic issues, such as whether to extend car-pool lanes along Highway 50. In cities nationwide, such lanes have helped spur carpooling and express bus service. But in Sacramento, city leaders have dragged their feet about even studying the idea.

For all these reasons, the Sacramento area faces a looming date with gridlock. Over the next two decades, the region is expected to add 1 million people and nearly as many vehicles.

During that time, the region's main transportation agency -- the Sacramento Area Council of Governments -- expects congestion to become four times worse, even if SACOG spends an estimated \$16 billion on new roads and expanded transit.

What will this mean? Commutes that take 30 minutes will grow to an hour or more. More fumes will waft from idling engines; more motorists will cut through neighborhoods; more businesses will be stuck in the slow lane as they try to deliver goods by truck.

Some local business leaders say a concrete solution -- a return to expansive highway building -- is the only answer.

"For the last quarter century, we have neglected our road network," said Roger Niello, an auto dealer and Sacramento County supervisor. "People think that by doing a catch-up investment in mass transit, we can get people out of their cars and solve congestion. That kind of thinking has been a horrible mistake."

Slapping down pavement, however, isn't as easy as it once was. Many local leaders fear that new freeways will only spur more development and traffic. And since Sacramento has some of the nation's worst smog, the federal government has told SACOG that it must invest in transit, car-pool lanes and other alternatives before widening freeways.

"We can't just look for a freeway fix," said Rusty Dupray, a SACOG board member and El Dorado County supervisor. "My constituents in El Dorado County don't want to see that. They don't want us to turn into another San Jose."

Unable to agree on a strategy, the region has tended to take a splintered approach, said SACOG Executive Director Martin Tuttle. Sacramento invests in transit, while Roseville builds roads. El Dorado County advocates car-pool lanes, while Davis becomes a bicycle mecca.

All the while, state highway engineers apply whatever Band-Aids they can -- such as the Highway 50 interchange they are reconstructing at Sunrise Boulevard.

Drive west down Highway 50 from El Dorado Hills to witness a decade of short-term fixes.

There's the \$12 million interchange the state built for Intel at Prairie City Road, with its sweeping ramps and Space Age design.

There's the \$11.5 million upgrade of the Folsom Boulevard interchange, and the car-pool lanes that crews are constructing from El Dorado Hills to Sunrise Boulevard, at a cost of \$35 million.

All these projects will improve traffic for a while, but then the orange cones will reappear, and motorists will endure more backups for the promise of another fix.

"I just got tired of it," said Rice, who used to spend 10 to 12 hours a week in his Toyota pickup. "I just sat there and fumed."

To get ahead of the growth curve, SACOG is compiling a \$16 billion plan to guide transportation spending for the next quarter century. Tuttle hopes the region can move beyond its current hub-and-spoke network of freeways, and build a new generation of roads and transit to "connect one job center to another."

But even with all that spending, Tuttle says traffic snarls are inevitable as Sacramento's suburbs grow, households become more affluent and two-breadwinner families insist on driving everywhere -- for work, play, shopping, errands and day care.

"The question is: Why can't we learn from other metro areas that are further along the growth curve than we are?" asked Tuttle. "Why can't we learn from their mistakes?"

In and around Sacramento, every freeway corridor -- including Interstates 80 and 5 and Highway 99 -- is feeling the transportation crush, but none more than Highway 50, California's first state highway.

Flanked by the American River and oak-studded foothills, Highway 50 faces a multitude of constraints, both natural and man-made. It continues to be an economic engine, but one that can't easily be re-engineered.

"Highway 50 is our freeway to nowhere," said Bob Fountain, a retired real estate professor from California State University, Sacramento. "It is our major congestion corridor, and it is only going to get worse."

Do the math

It's long before dawn when the earliest Highway 50 commuters crank up their engines, soon to become victims and perpetrators of congestion.

They drive out of ranchettes in Cameron Park and gated communities in El Dorado Hills. They feed into the freeway from Folsom subdivisions and from communities whose traffic is channeled across the American River at four clogged bridges: Hazel, Sunrise, Watt and Howe.

Simple mathematics explains what happens next. A typical freeway lane can handle about 2,000 cars an hour at 55 mph. But by 7:30 a.m., the westbound freeway contains about 15 percent more cars than it can carry. Traffic slows to a crawl.

Although few are aware of it, Highway 50's fate was sealed decades ago.

Starting in the 1970s, Sacramento County began approving extensive office complexes -- but few houses -- in Rancho Cordova. Twelve miles away, El Dorado County was approving upscale subdivisions -- with few jobs nearby -- in El Dorado Hills.

By 1982, a consultant for Sacramento County warned that local governments were creating a planning mess: an imbalance of jobs to housing along Highway 50. Five years later, County Executive Brian Richter declared the highway system was "going to hell in a handbasket" partly because of haphazard growth.

Despite such hand-wringing, Sacramento and El Dorado counties continued their building boom, often

with few requirements for developers to offset the resulting traffic.

In 1983, for instance, El Dorado County supervisors waived recommendations contained in a county environmental study that the El Dorado Hills Business Park pay for traffic improvements along Latrobe Road and Highway 50. Supervisors "just shined it on," said Doug Noble, who worked in the county's planning department at the time.

Even before that, El Dorado supervisors had approved the upscale Serrano subdivision without a condition that developers quickly build a freeway interchange to handle traffic from its 4,000 homes. As a result, Serrano is nearly half occupied and there's still no Silva Parkway interchange.

"People up here were shortsighted," said El Dorado Auditor Joe Harn. "They didn't plan for impacts that are obvious now."

With new commuters transforming the landscape between Folsom and Shingle Springs, westbound traffic on Highway 50 has increased more than 70 percent since 1990, with no extra lanes added. Average speeds during the morning rush hour have dropped to 16 mph near Folsom, some of the slowest in the region.

Asked who is responsible, local leaders point fingers at each other. "Stand on the overpass at Bass Lake Road (in El Dorado County), and you tell me where the traffic is coming from," said Folsom Mayor Steve Miklos. "It's not Folsom that's backing it up."

But Folsom is hardly a model of smart planning, said Bill Center, a former El Dorado County supervisor. In 1990, the Folsom City Council approved the 2,800-home Broadstone project without a requirement that developers build more lanes on the freeway, as an environmental report recommended.

"We are terribly concerned about Folsom," said Center, noting that Folsom has taken the first steps toward annexing 3,584 acres south of Highway 50 for development. "We could end up having all their traffic backing up into El Dorado County."

Part of the problem, say some local planners, is a myopic approach toward approving new subdivisions and office parks. Under the current system, local governments study a single project's traffic impacts, then negotiate with developers on fixes.

Often a developer will end up financing an off-site traffic light, or even an interchange. But rarely are they required to help widen adjacent freeways, meaning that agencies such as Caltrans and SACOG are asked to pick up the tab.

"We keep falling further behind," said Darryl Goehring, a senior planner with Sacramento County. "We keep taking this project-by-project approach. We try to negotiate whatever we can with developers, which is woefully inadequate to the problem."

To ensure that funding keeps up with growth, Goehring advocates charging higher transportation fees on developments that have region-wide impacts. But even supporters say the idea would be a tough sell, given the clout of the region's real estate industry.

"The bottom line is that local leaders are getting lots of (campaign) money from these developers, and they don't want to say no to them," said Mogavero, the Sacramento architect. "The whole system is set up so these guys can develop enormous chunks of land, with all the wrong styles of development."

According to a database of campaign contributions compiled by The Bee, developers are indeed the largest contributors to elected officials across the region.

Since 1990, the largest single giver has been Angelo Tsakopoulos, who owns more than 25,000 acres of land in the region and has developed large chunks of Folsom, El Dorado Hills, Laguna and Natomas. Along with his family and associates, Tsakopoulos has helped local politicians with more than \$240,000 in campaign funds during the past 10 years, despite limits on individual contributions. More than

\$168,000 went to officials who guide growth on the Highway 50 corridor.

Other big contributors include a who's who of Highway 50 developers, such as Serrano entrepreneurs Tony Mansour and Bill Parker, who gave more than \$32,200 to local leaders in Folsom and El Dorado counties, and Broadstone developer Harry Elliott, who gave nearly \$102,000 to candidates in Folsom and Sacramento County.

Critics say that these contributions are designed not only to elect developer-friendly politicians, but also to influence elected leaders who are more critical of current growth patterns.

Tsakopoulos referred all questions to his daughter, Eleni, who is president of his company, AKT Development. The younger Tsakopoulos rejected suggestions that her family contributes heavily to politicians to elicit favors in return.

"That is nonsense," she said. "The reason that we support elected officials is because we want to help leaders who will do good for our community."

Over the years, local leaders have done good deeds for the community, including the real estate community.

In 1992, lobbyists for AKT and other land speculators successfully urged Sacramento supervisors to overrule their planning staff and revise the proposed general plan. Because of the changes, developers are pushing ahead with projects such as Sunrise Douglas, the AKT development with more than 22,000 homes.

A year ago, county supervisors approved an Elliott Homes subdivision, the Villages of Zinfandel, even though it was in the flight path of a bustling air cargo facility at Mather Airport.

Roger Dickinson, a county supervisor and a key recipient of funds from both Tsakopoulos and Elliott, acknowledges that developers exert some influence over the board's decisions.

But the same is true for neighborhood groups, he added: "If you do not make the people from the neighborhoods happy, it doesn't matter if the developers give you a lot of money."

A fragile consensus

For better or worse, neighborhood groups have made their mark on the region. They have successfully opposed apartments near transit stations and they have won other crusades.

In the mid 1970s, homeowner groups in Fair Oaks and Carmichael pressured county supervisors to abandon rights of way for three planned bypasses that would have cut through their communities to connect Highway 50 with Interstate 80.

Without the bypasses, residents of some of Sacramento County's most affluent neighborhoods don't have to hear the sounds or smell the fumes of freeway traffic endured by residents of Oak Park and east Sacramento.

But with no easy way to travel between 50 and 80, motorists are funneled down thoroughfares such as Watt, Sunrise and Hazel, where John Burdette commutes every working day.

A 28-year-old resident of Rocklin, Burdette drove 15 minutes to work until he changed jobs a year ago. Now he faces a 70-minute crawl to south Sacramento, either by taking Interstate 80, or by slogging south down Hazel Boulevard to Highway 50.

On most days, the commute leaves him exhausted, frustrated and curious about why there's no easy way to travel north or south across the region.

"The worst part is how little time I have with my family," said Burdette, who moved to Rocklin four years ago. "I just wish someone would put in a bypass and make my day a little easier."

Burdette shouldn't expect a miracle any time soon, according to many transportation planners. And without a miracle, gridlock could be even closer than he fears.

For the last two years, SACOG has brought together community leaders, environmentalists and business people to brainstorm a 25-year blueprint for roads and transit. After several late-night sessions over pizza and sodas, the roundtable reached a fragile consensus last month on a package of proposals, including some connection between Highway 50 and Interstate 80.

But shortly after the package was unveiled, interest groups started punching holes in it. Some environmentalists criticized other environmentalists for even considering a bypass. Lobbyists for Intel and the homebuilding industry opposed plans to spend \$500 million on an improved community design to give transit a boost.

"We have a very divided political constituency," said Dickinson, the Sacramento supervisor and a SACOG member. "We are living in a period where there are very strong, very differing points of view and no consensus."

No easy escape

Perhaps the most divisive issue is HOV lanes -- freeway car-pool lanes reserved for "high-occupancy vehicles" carrying more than just the driver.

Metropolitan regions such as Washington D.C. and the Bay Area have added these lanes to encourage carpooling and facilitate express bus service.

In Sacramento, however, city leaders initially balked at sharing the cost of a \$5 million study of extending car-pool lanes into downtown. They said the study would cost too much money, divert resources away from transit and subsidize suburban commuters who have helped create their own predicament.

Finally, in November, city leaders allowed the study to go forward, but only after local governments agreed to discuss shouldering more of the region's social services.

"Dangerous" was how Niello, the Sacramento County supervisor, described the city's negotiating tactics. Effectively, said Niello, city leaders hijacked the HOV study and used "one public issue to force discussion on another, unrelated, issue."

With infighting still the norm, city and county officials may be unprepared to deal with another surge of growth along the Highway 50 corridor.

Over the next 20 years, Folsom, Sacramento County and El Dorado County have plans for more than 53,000 new homes along Highway 50, according to an analysis by Economic & Planning Systems, a Sacramento consulting firm.

About 36,800 are slated for Sacramento County, 11,500 for El Dorado County and 4,850 more for Folsom. Most of those homes were approved long before Highway 50's traffic was on anyone's radar.

As the homes are built, thousands more cars a day will flood onto Highway 50, eventually reaching a saturation point. At that moment, cars will back up onto interchanges and connecting streets. Before long, the whole corridor will come to a standstill.

"Local officials don't realize how quickly this can happen," said Peter Hathaway, a former staff director of the California Transportation Commission who is now SACOG's deputy director. "All it takes is one big development in Folsom or Sacramento County. In just a month, you can go from reasonable traffic

flow to a complete breakdown."

Go to : [Sacbee](#) / [Back to story](#)

[Contact Bee Customer Service](#)

[Advertise Online](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [Help](#) | [Site Map](#)

[News](#) | [Sports](#) | [Business](#) | [Politics](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Lifestyle](#) | [Travel](#) | [Women](#)

[Classifieds](#) | [Homes](#) | [Cars](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Shopping](#)

[GUIDE TO THE BEE:](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Contacts](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Bee Events](#) | [Community Involvement](#)

[Sacramento Bee Web sites]

[Sacbee.com](#) | [SacTicket.com](#) | [Sacramento.com](#)

[Contact sacbee.com](#)

This article is protected by copyright and should not be printed or distributed for anything except personal use.
The Sacramento Bee, 2100 Q St., P.O. Box 15779, Sacramento, CA 95852
Phone: (916) 321-1000

[Copyright © The Sacramento Bee](#)