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El Dorado moves to fix battered roads

Maintenance costs less than new pavement, a county official says.

By Cathy Locke -- Bee Staff Writer

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Funding for new roads often grabs the spotlight, but El Dorado County supervisors last week confronted the fiscal challenge of maintaining existing roads.

The board agreed Tuesday to transfer \$1.75 million in general fund revenue to the road maintenance fund.

The money is about a third of the estimated \$5.5 million needed for a program meeting industry-recommended standards for preserving pavement.

The board's action complies with the spirit, if not the letter, of Measure H, approved by county voters in 2000. The initiative required the county to allocate 50 percent of annual vehicle license fee revenue to the road fund.

Because of shifts in state allocations last year, counties no longer receive vehicle license fee revenue.

Although the 2000 initiative included specific language about the source of road funds, "we're saying we're going to honor Measure H, but we will take it out of the general fund," Supervisor Jack Sweeney said.

Failure to approve the transfer would have had major consequences for road maintenance, said Laura Gill, county chief administrative officer.

The board's action was preceded by a Department of Transportation presentation outlining the county's road maintenance needs.

Of the approximately 1,069 miles of county-maintained roads, 200 miles are categorized as "fair" to "failed," based on pavement conditions, said Tom Celio, deputy director of maintenance.

To bring those 200 miles up to an acceptable standard would cost an estimated \$96 million, according to the staff report. About \$37 million would be required to perform immediate, regular and routine maintenance on the remainder of the road system, the report says.

"I would like to see the 200 miles not get bigger," said Liz Diamond, interim transportation director. Since initiating a formal surface-treatment program in 2000, she said, the county has spent an average of \$2.8 million annually on road maintenance projects. "But the revenue's not there to continue at that level," Diamond said.

Budget constraints that postpone road maintenance and repairs prove costly over the long term, transportation staff members noted.

Routine maintenance using a surface treatment known as a slurry seal costs about \$15,000 per mile, Celio said, whereas rehabilitating or reconstructing a badly deteriorated roadway can cost from \$250,000 to \$480,000 per mile.

Based on pavement conditions, Celio said, 37 percent of county-maintained roads are listed in

excellent condition; 27 percent, good or very good; 24 percent, fair to poor; and 11 percent, very poor or failed. The county also maintains a number of dirt roads, which are not rated because they are unpaved. The county typically grades those roads two to four times a year, he said.

"We have a lot of roads that are 150 years old," Celio said. "Some started out as wagon ruts and then got some oil over them."

In addition to the loss of vehicle license fees, Diamond noted that the county has lost Proposition 42 revenue due to the state budget crisis. Under the measure, passed by California voters in 2002, the gasoline-sales tax was to have gone for street, highway and transit projects. It had generated \$676,000 to \$1.75 million annually for El Dorado County.

Since the 2001-02 fiscal year, the county also had received \$400,000 to \$860,000 annually in federal funds designated primarily for transit services, Diamond said. But as fuel costs have increased, those monies have been absorbed by the transit program and are no longer available for road maintenance, she said.

Faced with declining state and federal funding, counties have turned to local revenue sources. About five years ago, El Dorado County instituted a policy requiring new subdivisions to establish benefit assessment districts to fund road maintenance and drainage projects, Celio said.

As a result, he said, streets in newer developments with a guaranteed funding stream may be repaired before roads elsewhere in the county that are in worse shape.

Diamond said the board also could consider seeking a quarter-or half-cent sales-tax increase. "Many counties have done that and dedicated it to transportation," she said.

Local monies are needed, Diamond said, to leverage state and federal funds.

On the road

Condition of county-maintained roads, based on the Department of Transportation's pavement condition index:

Excellent: 37 percent

Good-very good: 27 percent

Fair-poor: 24 percent

Very poor-failed: 11 percent.

The county also maintains a number of dirt roads, which are not rated because they are unpaved.

Due to rounding, percentages do not total 100.

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