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Highway 50 plan may not be green enough for state

By Tony Bizjak - tbizjak@sacbee.com

Published 12:00 am PDT Wednesday, August 13, 2008

In what appears to be a California first, state highway officials are shelving a major Highway 50 widening plan in Sacramento until they can study whether the expansion will contribute to global warming.

The state Department of Transportation announced Tuesday it will not fight a Sacramento court ruling that the agency conducted an incomplete environmental review for a project that would add lanes on the congested Rancho Cordova freeway.

For commuters in the fast-growing Highway 50 corridor, it means no new freeway elbow room – if any at all – until at least 2014.

The added lanes, planned between Sunrise Boulevard and Watt Avenue, would be designated for carpools, buses and high-mileage vehicles during morning and afternoon commutes.

The freeway already has carpool lanes between Sunrise Boulevard and El Dorado Hills, and Caltrans officials have talked of extending carpool lanes into downtown Sacramento.

The court ruling, issued in July by local Judge Timothy Frawley, marked the first time a California court ordered a study of greenhouse gas emissions for a transportation project, highway officials said. Scientists consider transportation a key source of greenhouse gases, which contribute to global warming.

Ironically, Caltrans had billed the project as environmentally sensitive because the lanes would encourage people to double up in cars or take transit, but the lawsuit came from the environmentalists.

The Environmental Council of Sacramento and Neighbors Advocating Sustainable Transportation contend that adding new lanes could encourage more car use and pollution. They challenged Caltrans to show otherwise.

In his ruling, Judge Frawley concluded the California Environmental Quality Act requires Caltrans to do more detailed analyses. He wrote that, in order to comply with the law, Caltrans also must look into whether more transit, such as buses and light rail, could serve a similar purpose as a widened freeway.

ECOS representative Eric Davis called Caltrans' decision to comply "fantastic."

"We want to have all the facts out there so we can get the public in Sacramento thinking about whether this is the direction we want to go," Davis said. "Do we want to build (big road) projects like we did in the 1950s, or do we really change our region?"

Jody Jones, Caltrans' Sacramento area district head, said the studies will be slow but hopefully won't derail the project.

"We'll be breaking new ground," Jones said. "It is going to take some time, a year to a year and a half."

The court ruling is limited to the Highway 50 expansion project, officials said. However, Jones said the Sacramento district office also will conduct greenhouse gas emission studies on future freeway-widening projects, such as planned HOV lanes on Interstate 5 between Elk Grove and downtown Sacramento.

Jones said Caltrans still hopes to build a seamless HOV network on Sacramento's core freeways, with HOV-only flyover ramps at major interchanges.

"Caltrans still believes that has tremendous benefits for mobility in the region," Jones said.

Caltrans officials said they also are reviewing the local court ruling to determine whether they should conduct more detailed environmental reviews on future projects elsewhere in the state.

State Attorney General Jerry Brown applauded the ruling and Caltrans' agreement to comply.

"This should quiet some of the more misguided critics who have been claiming the (California Environmental Quality Act) did not require analysis of greenhouse gas impacts," Brown said.

Although the ruling is limited to one project, it offers an indication of the role state agencies likely will play as California attempts to meet its mandate to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2020.

The Governor's Office recently asked the state Air Resources Board to come up with guidelines next year for agencies such as Caltrans on how to conduct greenhouse gas emission studies.

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