

LOIS HENRY

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Henry column: County takes bold, risky move for roads



By LOIS HENRY, Californian columnist | Saturday, Dec 8 2007 7:33 PM

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I opened the paper on Wednesday and could hardly believe my eyes -- Kern County supervisors actually voted to make developers pay their fair share for roads.

Damn the politics, full speed ahead!

It was a masterful stroke that linked two key pieces of the roads puzzle together -- traffic impact fees paid by developers and bond money that taxpayers will repay via the county's general fund.

The impact fee, which was more than doubled to \$12,958 per home, pays for things like stoplights, wider roads and intersections needed as new development occurs.

The bulk of the \$150 million bond will go to major new road projects in conjunction with the city's Thomas Road Improvement Program projects. Despite developer angst over the new fee, the bond is really the key to our traffic problems, but more about that later.

Given our ever-worsening traffic, this all may seem like a no-brainer, but politically speaking, it was a bold -- even risky -- move.

We'll have to see how it shakes out, especially for Ray Watson, who's up for re-election next June, and who already has one declared opponent, the cocky Taft Mayor Cliff Thompson, who's backed by State Sen. Dean Florez.

Watson's other possible opponent, Bakersfield City Councilman David "is-he-in-or-is-he-out" Couch, told me he's still mulling whether to run. But he predicted slapping developers with this fee wouldn't hurt Watson.

If he'd voted against it, or if supervisors had done nothing, that would have been a bigger issue.

Watson acknowledged the fee could become an election issue, but, so far, no one has told him they're pulling their support because of the increase.

"Over the years, I've found that developers want predictability and timeliness," Watson said.

Yeah, but they also like politicians they can count on, and I've already heard some in the development community are contemplating retribution.

They're mostly rankled by how the county went about the fee.

Instead of the long process of establishing which road projects are needed and haggling over the cost, the county took a shortcut and used the city's project list that had already been agreed to some months back when the city set an interim traffic fee.

Though County Resource Management Director David Price told me that was all on the up and up, a number of builders disagreed.

In fact, the Home Builders Association (formerly known as the Building Industry Association) held an emergency meeting on Monday, the day before the county's vote, to talk about lawyering up to stop the fee.

As I heard it, Price and County Roads Director Craig Pope went to the meeting and asked the association to please not go to war over this fee, and they would revisit it when the general plan is updated over the next year or so.

Price and Pope both said they went to explain their plan to HBA members, and afterward the builders seemed to relax a bit.

I'm no so sure about that. But I was told they would not, as a group, sue.

Pope said builders should focus on the bond.

"The bond takes care of the big-ticket items and keeps TRIP online, and that is the answer," he said.

The county needed a big wad of cash so it could get off the sidelines and get in the game on the Thomas Road projects.

With the outcome of last November's half-cent sales tax trouncing still ringing in supervisors' and planners' ears, there was no way they were going to saddle voters with that debt and give developers a pass. That certainly would have been an election issue, and not just this June.

So spread the pain around, and we're all going to pay, which is as it should be since we all use the roads.

And speaking of roads, from what I hear, the Thomas Roads plan, which featured roads that didn't connect and not enough money to build them, will likely be changing.

City, county and Caltrans staffers have been feverishly going over various alternatives that would actually link some highways or freeways, penciling out costs and looking at environmental issues.

None of the alternatives are pain-free, however.

I'm hearing an announcement could be just weeks away. Stay tuned.

Lois Henry's column appears Wednesdays and Sundays. Comment at [people.bakersfield.com /home/Blog/noholdsbarred](http://people.bakersfield.com/home/Blog/noholdsbarred), e-mail her at lhenry@bakersfield.com or call her at 395-7373.

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