

Sheldon area braces for change as Grant Line Road's future is debated

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When the sun sets, Grant Line Road is as quiet as a graveyard. That hasn't changed much in the 25 years Karen and Dave Young have lived in Sheldon, a bucolic area where residents plant crops, raise livestock and enjoy the open fields and country roads. Their sheep act as lawnmowers.

"That's why we all moved out here. We didn't want the city on top of us," said Karen Young.

But a proposed expressway could widen Grant Line Road through Sheldon to four lanes, and that prospect is worrying residents who say it would disrupt the community's tranquil pace. Others, mainly small-business owners, say the project could enhance the community's commercial area if it's done right.

Called the Capital Southeast Connector, the nearly 35-mile expressway would link Interstate 5, south of Elk Grove, to Highway 50 in El Dorado County. It's intended to relieve freeway congestion by allowing commuters to bypass downtown Sacramento, according to a local governments Joint Powers Authority (JPA).

The group, which oversees the project, is made up of officials from Elk Grove, Folsom, Rancho Cordova and El Dorado and Sacramento counties.

While the project is decades away from completion, three of four proposed routes would follow Grant Line Road through Sheldon to Sunrise Boulevard or White Rock Road.

"That's the route everyone is leaning toward and saying is the most natural," said JPA Executive Director Tom Zlotkowski.

The fourth alternative would follow Bradshaw Road north, avoiding most of Sheldon. It's unlikely that route will be chosen because it involves building about four miles of new road, which would add to the project's estimated \$800 million price tag, Zlotkowski said.

This means that the connector will likely affect Sheldon, a rural community he called the "most sensitive" area to the road's construction.

"We're trying our best to preserve their community values the best we can, recognizing that change will eventually come," he said.

Protecting a way of life

Roads in Sheldon are distinctly rural. The absence of curbs and sidewalks allows residents to ride horses. Instead of relying on city water services, residents use septic tanks and water wells. Turnarounds are wider for tractor trailers, and pedestrian signs often display a person riding a horse.

Barbara Lemar, who has lived in Sheldon for 10 years, said the needs of the rural community must be considered as engineers design the connector.

"I'm hoping that the rural lifestyle doesn't change and doesn't move along," she said. "We're not saying that they have to live the way that we want to live; we're just saying, 'Let us live the way we want to.'"

For Lemar, rural means enjoying the barnyard smell, hearing birds and seeing the stars at night.

She, like many Sheldon residents, is concerned the connector would attract more commuters to the nearly 3-mile stretch of Grant Line Road.

How much the project affects Sheldon depends on Grant Line Road's blueprint: Should it bypass the commercial area entirely, allow limited traffic access or remain unchanged as a two-lane road? That question has divided residents on how the road should be configured.

If the connector uses Bradshaw Road, most of Sheldon would be unaffected.

Tom Franzoia, a Sheldon resident and liaison between the JPA and the community, favors a raised bypass through the Cosumnes River floodplain with no stop signals.

He said a limited-access road would bring more traffic.

"Grant Line Road is going to be a heavily traveled, heavily congested roadway that would just decimate the small town feeling," he said.

Businesses oppose bypass

But not all residents favor the bypass, especially small-business owners. They say that a limited-access road that goes straight through the commercial area would allow businesses to attract more customers.

A limited-access road would have a raised center median through Sheldon and eliminate direct driveway access. Grant Line Road would be widened to four lanes.

Corky Donnelly, Sheldon Feed & Supply owner, said his business has been in the same spot on Grant Line Road for more than 40 years. The limited-access road, if aligned correctly, would allow small businesses to maintain their location, and that's important because people are creatures of habit, he said.

"Without the business community, there is no community of Sheldon," he said.

After a multi-day workshop this month with consultants from Berkeley-based Design, Community & Environment, residents helped narrow the limited-access road options to two – one that would go straight through downtown Sheldon and another that would curve south to bypass the area's historic center.

While pleased with the workshop, Donnelly said that more work needs to be done to fine-tune the details of the limited-access road. The current plan makes it difficult for customers with large trucks and rigs to easily get in and out of businesses, he said.

An environmental impact report that presents all alternatives is expected to be released to the public in December.

But no matter what option the JPA board approves next year, Zlotkowski noted that Grant Line Road will not be the same two-lane road residents have known for years.

"Traffic dictates that things will change, that communities adjust."

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