

MEASURES TO REDUCE TRAFFIC CONGESTION

by Supervisor Linda Parks, December 2007

Traffic congestion is one of the biggest problems facing our region. Until recently residents who are impacted by traffic, noise and smog have felt helpless to do anything about it. Now through an initiative concept originated by Richard Francis, the author of the SOAR (Save Open space and Agricultural Resources) initiatives, citizens have found a new tool to fight congestion. They have launched traffic fighting initiatives in the cities of Thousand Oaks and Oxnard.

In many cities traffic congestion is treated like a necessary evil that can only be resolved by adding more traffic lanes. Yet the fix can be worse than the problem when new lanes, which often cost millions of dollars to build, become congested again and result in more air pollution and noise.

Road widening projects on city streets take out landscaping and sometimes even bike lanes, as was the case in the City of Westlake Village when the bike lanes on Lindero Canyon Road were removed to add more traffic lanes. When widening projects about housing tracts they bring roads closer to homes and impact neighborhoods.

One way to reduce congestion is to increase our transportation options so not everyone has to travel by car. Another way to reduce congestion is to slow the pace of new development in areas where roads are already congested.

Organizers of the traffic initiatives believe citizen involvement is needed to realize a better, less congested future. Faced with a growing problem, residents of Oxnard and Thousand Oaks want voters to decide on development projects that significantly increase congestion.

The Oxnard traffic initiative would require a public vote for residential projects exceeding five units, or commercial development exceeding 5,000 square feet if the resulting project would cause the traffic flow at any intersection within a five-mile radius to drop below what is referred to as a "C" Level of Service by traffic engineers. Level of Service C (or LOS C) is considered the last acceptable level of service on a scale from "A" (free flow) to "F" (traffic jam conditions). Many of Oxnard's intersections have already fallen below the acceptable service level of LOS C.

The Thousand Oaks traffic initiative applies to commercial projects over 75,000 square feet and non-commercial projects over 100,000 square feet. It triggers a vote if the project worsens traffic below LOS C, even if the developer could add more lanes to get the LOS up to a LOS C. By having voters weigh in prior to the traffic mitigation, they will be the ones to decide if it is appropriate to take out public landscaping, or bike lanes, or sidewalks or street parking so a developer can add more lanes to accommodate the thousands of additional daily car trips the development will generate.

We have found with the SOAR initiatives protecting open space by vote of the people, developers prefer not to propose projects that wipe out open space, or if they do, that they are projects the voters support. The traffic initiatives can have the same effect. Developers would be encouraged to build projects that don't generate as much traffic so they don't have to go to a vote of the people, or they can try to make their projects enticing to the voters. Either way it would be a win-win for those concerned about too much traffic.