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Pittsburg rattles road-funding saber

by Dave Roberts

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Pittsburg officials want to extend James Donlon Boulevard, which currently ends near Somersville Road, west to Kirker Pass Road in order to relieve congestion on Buchanan Road. If it doesn't get funding, Pittsburg might withdraw from ECCRFFA.

Photo by Dave Roberts

A pair of vital East County transportation projects could be in jeopardy if Pittsburg officials follow through on a threat to back out of a financing agreement unless they get more money.

The widening of Highway 4 east of Hillcrest Avenue in Antioch and construction of an eBART rail line from the Bay Point BART Station to Hillcrest Avenue both receive funding from the East Contra Costa Regional Fee and Financing Authority (ECCRFFA).

Pittsburg officials are seeking \$27 million to extend James Donlon Boulevard, which currently ends near Somersville Road in Antioch, to the west to Kirker Pass Road, a project that currently has no ECCRFFA funding.

"Should ECCRFFA decide not to authorize expending full potential funding of this (James Donlon) Project within the next five years, the City of Pittsburg requests that you provide information on how the city may withdraw from ECCRFFA," wrote Pittsburg City Engineer Joe Sbranti in an April 30 letter to ECCRFFA.

ECCRFFA, which is comprised of the county and cities of Antioch, Brentwood, Oakley and Pittsburg, raises funds from fees on new development in East County. As of the beginning of this year, it has committed \$213 million for transportation projects, nearly all of which has gone to the Highway 4 Bypass. Another \$80 million has been committed to the widening of Highway 4.

No funding has been allocated to construct the James Donlon Extension, which is designed to reduce the traffic congestion on Buchanan Road in Pittsburg – (the project used to be called the Buchanan Road Bypass). And that worries Pittsburg officials, who have contributed \$16 million to ECCRFFA, but feel that they have not gotten enough local bang for their bucks.

But in order to free up funding for the James Donlon Extension, money would need to be taken from the widening of Highway 4, which "could jeopardize not only the completion of the widening project, but could jeopardize the eBART Extension project as well," wrote ECCRFFA Project Manager Dale Dennis in a memo to the board.

Concerns have been expressed by the Contra Costa Transportation Authority (CCTA) about whether, due to the building construction slowdown, ECCRFFA will be able to pony up the \$80 million when it's needed for the Highway 4 widening. As a result, CCTA officials have asked ECCRFFA to not spend any more money on the Highway 4 Bypass, Vasco Road and other East County projects, according to Dennis.

ECCRFFA board members are concerned about Pittsburg's threat to withdraw.

"It would be in the best interest of everyone if we continue to keep Pittsburg engaged in the regional planning process," said County Supervisor Federal Glover via e-mail. "At this point, there isn't any money to spare beyond the projects we've already launched.

"However, I understand Pittsburg's concern, and the Buchanan Road/James Donlon Bypass would be beneficial to those communities east of Pittsburg. ECCRFFA needs to assure city leaders that (it) will receive our attention once the economy picks up and fees start coming in from future projects."

Antioch Councilman Brian Kalinowski said via e-mail, "I support the (Buchanan) bypass project in Pittsburg, but at this point East County priorities are on Highway 4 and eBART. I would like to work with Pittsburg to ensure they get their 'fair share,' but regional transportation projects need to have a regional approach."

Oakley Councilman Jim Frazier expressed hope that "we can come to a solution that is acceptable to ... the City of Pittsburg to remain united as a region."

Brentwood Mayor Bob Taylor said, "There has to remain unity with ECCRFFA among all of the cities, because what benefits one benefits all. Each city has its wants and needs. Obviously, each city can do as it wishes. But personally I would really prefer to see them stick it out."

In a phone interview Tuesday, Sbranti downplayed the threatening nature of his letter, and said Pittsburg officials are not looking to take money from the highway-widening project.

"I was asking when the funding (for the James Donlon Extension) would be available – not could you take it from another project," he said. "The City of Pittsburg is not disputing that Highway 4 is a high-priority project. We are not asking for any change of priority. The question was: This is another important project – when do you think we will be able to get funding for that project?"

The issue is scheduled to be discussed at the next ECCRFFA meeting at 6:40 p.m. on Aug. 13 in the Tri Delta Transit meeting room, 801 Wilbur Ave. in Antioch.

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