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Spending spree on El Dorado measures

Efforts to influence voters on a controversial county land-use issue reach an unusual level.

By Cathy Locke -- Bee Staff Writer

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Two ballot measures related to land use and traffic have pushed campaigning in El Dorado County into a new and expensive arena.

Efforts to influence voters that began last fall with neighborhood coffees and community forums moved to the airwaves as a group calling itself "We Can't Afford Measure D" began running television advertisements.

The ads, featuring El Dorado County growers and vintners, appear on broadcast and cable television at a cost of \$181,475, according to campaign finance statements filed Thursday.

Barbara O'Connor, a political analyst and communications professor at California State University, Sacramento, questions how effective the ads are in an election dealing with complicated land-use issues.

"Typically, if you buy for a market of that size, you would need close to \$1 million to have it make a dent," she said.

She noted, however, that the anti-Measure D ads have an advantage of not competing with other television campaign ads in the March election.

Political veterans on both sides of the ballot issues say it is unusual for El Dorado County campaigns to be waged via television.

"I think they are trying to buy the election," said former county Supervisor Bill Center, a leader of the group that circulated petitions to place Measures B and D on the March 8 ballot.

Campaign finance statements released through Thursday showed that three campaign committees opposing Center's group had raised slightly more than \$645,000 and spent approximately \$777,000. Center's "No Gridlock Committee" had raised approximately \$136,500 and spent about \$71,400, according to campaign statements.

Art Marinaccio, a Measure D opponent, said the television spots and campaign expenditures illustrate the election's importance. A large voter turnout is necessary for a decisive outcome, he said.

"Voters just have to understand how important this is. It is difficult to explain to people how it is relevant to them," Marinaccio said.

Measures B and D are part of the county's long-running land-use battles.

Measure B is a referendum on the county general plan, adopted by the Board of Supervisors in July. Measure D, a related initiative, would amend the county charter to tie approval of new development to improvements to Highway 50. It would prohibit supervisors from adopting a general plan that at buildout would cause gridlock conditions on the highway during peak periods.

To avoid gridlock, Measure D would prohibit supervisors from approving single-family residential lot splits or subdivisions of three or more parcels until Highway 50 is widened to eight lanes between Cameron Park and the Sacramento County line. Proponents say the measure would not restrict building on the more than 20,000 parcels already approved nor would it affect commercial, agricultural or multifamily residential development.

Petition drives to place the measures on the ballot were led by a group of current and former elected officials who objected to the board's decision to select, from three alternatives, the plan that allows the most growth. They have squared off in recent months against other elected officials who maintain the board-adopted plan is a compromise between pro-growth and slow-growth interests.

Supporters of the board-adopted general plan urge a "yes" vote on Measure B and a "no" vote on Measure D. Opponents of the general plan say vote "no" on B and "yes" on D.

The "Yes on B" campaign, the "We Can't Afford Measure D" committee and the similarly aligned "Taxpayers for Responsible Government" have raised significantly more than their opposition.

"We calculate we're being outspent at least 10-to-1," said Nancy Campbell, president of the League of Women Voters, El Dorado County. The league opposes Measure B and supports D because the 2004 general plan did not adequately involve regional and state transportation agencies, she said.

Measure B proponents cite broad support from the business, agricultural and educational communities, as well as endorsements from state Sen. Dave Cox, R-Fair Oaks, Assemblyman Tim Leslie, R-Tahoe City, and Rep. John Doolittle, R-Roseville.

Opponents of Measure B, including Center and Supervisor Charlie Paine, say traffic is the key issue in both measures. Development already approved would require an eight-lane Highway 50 between Cameron Park and the Sacramento County line to avoid gridlock during peak periods, they say. They contend the general plan would allow 78,000 new homes and boost population from 121,000 to 317,000 over approximately the next 20 years.

They say that growth would triple traffic on county roads, while the only improvement to Highway 50 planned during the next 20 years is adding a car pool lane between El Dorado Hills and Cameron Park.

"The issue that drove us was that the entire plan is based upon a fiction," Center told voters during a recent forum in Camino. An eight-lane Highway 50 isn't funded and hasn't been approved by any state or regional agency, he said.

Supervisors Jack Sweeney and Helen Baumann, Measure B supporters, say general plan opponents are focusing on the wrong figures.

Those who say the 2004 plan allows too much growth cite housing and population projections for buildout, figures Sweeney said won't be reached.

He said with a projected average of about 1,300 building permits being issued each year, by 2025 approximately 30,000 new homes would be constructed. Topography, road and environmental restrictions in the plan also would keep growth in check, he said.

Sweeney agreed that Highway 50 isn't likely to be widened to eight lanes in the next 20 years.

"I don't think we would want eight lanes," he told a Camino audience. "We ought to adopt a general plan and encourage people to live and work in El Dorado County."

Center countered that a balance of jobs and housing is ideal, but to afford the county's upscale homes, residents typically work in high-paying jobs elsewhere.

Sweeney and Baumann argue that Highway 50 traffic can be alleviated by improving parallel thoroughfares such as Green Valley and White Rock roads.

David Pratt, a grower featured in the anti-Measure D television ad, said traffic fees from new development finance improvements in more populated areas that otherwise would siphon county money from work on rural roads.

Measure B proponents claim support from an electorate they say is weary of years of debate and the cost - an estimated \$15 million - of creating a general plan. Sweeney calls the election the most important in El Dorado County.

"We need to stop general planning and get back to county business," he told an El Dorado Hills audience.

Supporters of Measure B say rejection of the 2004 general plan would start another long, expensive process to develop a new plan.

But opponents point out that environmental studies were done for three alternatives and say supervisors could adopt one within a few months. They also point out that 70 percent of voters a year ago rejected a measure calling for adoption of the 1996 general plan alternative, on which the 2004 plan is based.

Measure B backers counter that many people opposed last year's measure because they dislike "ballot-box planning."

But Center, the no-on-B, yes-on-D advocate, argues it was a clear message that residents want to limit growth and traffic congestion, noting that Measure B proponents have incorporated that sentiment into their campaign.

"They're telling the public what the public wants to hear," Center said.

Tale of two measures

Two key ballot measures facing voters in El Dorado County on March 8 are Measure B and Measure D. Both have generated intense interest on both sides of the issues they address. Here is a brief look at each:

Measure B

- A referendum on the 2004 El Dorado County General Plan adopted by the Board of Supervisors.
- A "yes" vote is a vote to adopt the plan. A "no" vote is a vote to reject the plan.

Measure D

- A county charter amendment.
- Prohibits the Board of Supervisors from adopting a general plan that would result in gridlock conditions on Highway 50 during peak traffic periods at buildout.
- Prohibits the Board of Supervisors from approving single-family residential lot splits or subdivisions of three or more parcels until Highway 50 is widened to eight lanes between Cameron Park and the Sacramento County line.
- The measure would not restrict building on parcels already approved, nor would it affect commercial, agricultural or multifamily residential development.
- A "yes" vote is a vote to amend the charter. A "no" vote is a vote against the amendment.

Major campaign donors

- "Yes on B" and "No on D" - California Alliance for Jobs Rebuild California Committee, \$180,000; Serrano Associates, \$84,000; Doug Veerkamp General Engineering Inc., \$59,900; Wetsel Oviatt Lumber Co., \$45,000; attorney John G. Sinadinos, \$20,000.
- "No on B" and "Yes On D" - Moore Methods, \$47,119 in nonmonetary contributions; EPIC of Georgetown, \$6,000; Sierra Club-Maidu Group, \$5,923.

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