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A plan to fix tomorrow's traffic today

With construction at a historic low, at first glance it looks like a strange vestige of the housing bubble for the Regional Transportation Planning Agency to be promoting a new development fee for widening Interstate 5.

The "Fix 5" fee first surfaced when thousands of new houses were on the drawing boards in Shasta and northern Tehama counties. Those subdivisions — Sun City Tehama, the Vineyards in Anderson and others — are now on hold if not bankrupt.

The specter of freeway gridlock? It's distant.

But the RTPA is still promoting a remodeled "Fix 5" plan, which it will pitch Tuesday to the Shasta County Board of Supervisors.

As now drafted, the proposal includes two big changes. One lumps several interchanges and other major road improvements around the county, along with I-5, into a broader plan that Dan Little, director of the RTPA, says would give cities and the county more flexibility and control over their money. It doesn't change the bottom line, however, which is a higher fee.

More importantly, the proposal would defer collecting the new fee as long as the county's growth is slow. Little suggests launching the fee when the population increases by 1 percent in a year, a rate the county easily surpassed early in the decade but hasn't seen since 2003-2004. The fee would then phase in over four years.

This concept makes a lot of sense. Imposing new fees on development today would only compound the building industry's troubles, and in any case we're not suffering growth pains.

Down the road, though, the economy will rebound. Growth and traffic on I-5 will surge. It's smart to plan today for tomorrow's development. Otherwise, by the time we realize the next boom is happening, bureaucracies as slow as Bay Area traffic will be too late to handle it.

The fee won't be up for a formal vote until later this year, but in the meantime even fee-skeptical officials ought to keep one eye on the future and listen with an open mind.

Our view: The revised 'Fix 5' plan offers an intriguing method to raise fees when growth resumes.