

COMMUNITY VOICE



Gurnam Pamma

Congestion Is Not Just an Urban Issue

When Gurnam Pamma arrived in Live Oak in 1971, the 20-year-old from India had \$8 in his pocket, given to him by his father. He went to work in the fields, earning \$1.35 an hour. Then Live Oak had about 1,100 residents; now the population is approaching 10,000. Over almost five decades of hard work, Pamma's farm and business have also grown. His family farms more than 1,400 acres of walnuts, almonds, prunes, peaches, and some kiwis and persimmons. About four years ago he also founded a walnut and prune processing facility, Sutter Buttes Mercantile.

But Live Oak's transportation infrastructure has not grown enough to accommodate all the new residents. Congestion is bad and the City of Live Oak and Sutter County are struggling to maintain the roads they do have, he says, let alone build more. The road that leads to Sutter Buttes Mercantile passes through both Sutter and Butte counties. The Butte portion is paved, the Sutter section unpaved, and heavily-laden trucks have to contend with the mud in winter.

"Now, there is 900 percent more traffic on the roads and it takes a long time to move the produce, especially in Live Oak. We have route 99 going through town and in the morning and evening, it is always very congested from the center of the city up

to the [Butte] county line, about three-and-a-half miles. It can be backed up the whole way," says Pamma.

When trucks loaded with crates of walnuts or prunes leave Sutter Buttes Mercantile, located near the Sutter/Butte county line, for the Port of Oakland, sometimes they have to wait at the rural intersection with Route 99 for four or five cycles of the traffic lights in the center of Live Oak before they can turn right. It costs his business time and fuel.

As Pamma sees it, the problem is that Live Oak's growth has been fueled by cheap houses. "People live in this city but they have to work outside the area. We don't have many facilities here that can give people jobs. They go to Sacramento, some of them go to Chico, some of them go to Oroville. So we need some manufacturing to provide jobs. But people always come to Live Oak because the houses are cheaper here than in Yuba City. It takes 10-15 minutes more to get to Sacramento but it's cheaper to live here."

In 2040, Pamma will turn 90 and he jokes that by then he won't need the infrastructure upgrades he is seeking now. He loves Live Oak for its small-town sense of community but worries there is not enough to keep his grandchildren there, unless they want to be farmers. "We should have some sort of industry here so people can have jobs. We need more jobs."