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Rural traffic project vies for funds

SOME SAY STATE BOND MONEY SHOULD GO WHERE IT AFFECTS MORE DRIVERS

By Erik N. Nelson
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John Pinches remembers being a Mendocino County teenager, stuck behind the wheel in his '69 Chevy pickup, waiting for the summer traffic to move on Highway 101 through the hamlet of Willits.

Now he's 55 and traffic seems worse than ever. Visitors from the Bay Area continue to mob summer events such as Humboldt County's "Reggae on the River" and flood through the town Pinches represents on the Board of Supervisors.

He is thrilled, however, that a \$20 billion state transportation bond could unburden his town of decades of summer traffic jams. But Willits' relief could come at the expense of several key Bay Area projects, such as improving the Interstate 280-880 interchange next to the Valley Fair shopping center in San Jose and upgrading Highway 101 to a freeway south of Gilroy.

And it could also affect long-range plans to build an alternate to Highway 152, the two-lane section from 101 east to Pacheco Pass. That road can only be built if 101 south of Gilroy is widened to six lanes with a new interchange at Highway 25.

Closing the Willits bypass project's \$150 million funding gap is not what California voters envisioned, however, when they passed the bond Nov. 7, argue Bay Area business and transportation leaders. While projects in the Bay Area could provide relief for hundreds of thousands of motorists, rural projects like a bypass around a town of 5,000 would solve a relatively minor traffic issue.

"These particular funds don't apply to that particular project, in our view," said Jim Wunderman, president of the Bay Area Council of top business executives.

"We're asking that funds be focused on projects where huge numbers of people are stuck every day for long periods in virtual bumper-to-bumper traffic, trying to get to their jobs, trying to get home," Wunderman said. "It's affecting our economy and the quality of life for a large number of people."

Competing traffic jams

According to a 2000 traffic congestion study, motorists would waste a combined 225 hours each rush hour in 2008 without the Willits bypass. In 2004, eastbound Interstate 80 across the Bay Bridge into Emeryville -- the least of the Bay Area's top-10 worst bottlenecks -- exceeded that figure by a factor of 10.

The Bay Area's worst bottleneck, westbound I-80 from state Highway 4 to the bridge, clocked in at 10,080 hours of rush-hour delay.

While Bay Area leaders would like to get as much as possible of the transportation bond's \$1.8 billion Northern California share of the \$4.5 billion Corridor Mobility Improvement Account, rural projects are also eligible.

The Metropolitan Transportation Commission has a list of \$2 billion worth of Bay Area projects. Caltrans is recommending about \$1.5 billion worth of projects for the Bay Area. Caltrans is also recommending six more rural "connectivity" projects -- including the Willits bypass -- totaling \$462 million.

The state commission, which plans to float its staff recommendations Feb. 20 and vote on a final list of projects Feb. 28, argues that the guidelines it adopted in November closely follow the bond measure's language.

"The MTC's spin is that corridor mobility is urban congestion," said David Brewer, the commission's chief deputy director. "We think that would be an extreme reading of what the bond act actually says."

As written and enacted by California voters, the bond measure allows the Corridor Mobility program to fund a project that "improves the connectivity of the state highway system between rural, suburban and urban areas," as well as one that "improves mobility in a high-congestion corridor" or "improves the operation or safety of a highway or road segment."

Using the money

While rural highway connections may fit the bond's criteria, the state will get more for its money by unclogging the arteries of its economic heart than it will by speeding up RVs passing through Willits, Bay Area officials contend.

"Our issue is with the best use of the money," said Randy Rentschler, MTC spokesman. "Addressing the congestion frustrations of the millions that live in urban areas is, in our view, a much better investment of state dollars than to address the intermittent frustrations of the thousands in rural California."

Some of the thinking that went into Caltrans' recommendations -- which the bond requires the state commission to consider along with county and regional commission choices -- involved anticipating future traffic issues that will spring from current growth patterns, Ross Chittenden, Caltrans' Proposition 1B program manager, said.

"We're trying to get ahead of the congestion curve, but it is also trying to address safety issues before they really pop up," Chittenden said.

In addition, "a lot of these corridors play a large role in promoting the economy," such as the timber industry and the Port of Eureka, north of Willits, Chittenden said, adding that freight shipments are often "pinched with sharp curves" or held up in places like Willits.

"Congestion is not only sitting on the 880 in the Bay Area going very slowly," he added. "It's anything that restricts more free flow of people, goods and services."

One of many contributors to Willits' congestion is the August reggae festival to the north, which attracts thousands of Bay Area fans.

And the first thing to stop those fans and other motorists on the way up from San Francisco, Pinches says, are the traffic signals in Willits -- the first ones north of the Golden Gate Bridge on 101.

"I'm certainly appreciative that the state's finally realized that we have problems with our highways," Pinches said. "Tell those folks down there that it's our turn."

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