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Race begins for transportation funds

Bay Area officials have until Jan. 15 to submit highway improvement projects

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Inside Bay Area

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Now that Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, the state legislature and finally, the voters have passed the \$20 billion Proposition 1B transportation bond, Bay Area officials are scrambling to make sure they get their piece of the pie before it's too late.

Even though the measure was just approved Tuesday by 61 percent of California's electorate, the bond's biggest piece, a \$4.5 billion "corridor mobility" highway improvement program, has a Jan. 15 deadline for submitting projects to state officials.

On that deadline teeters the fate of a fourth bore of the Caldecott Tunnel along with improvements to interstates 80, 580, 880, 680 and Highway 4 in Alameda and Contra Costa counties and U.S. Highway 101 in San Mateo County.

And in the geologically slow world of public works projects, two months might as well be a nanosecond.

There are priorities to argue about, first in committee, then in the full board, then on to a regional committee and commission. Then there are environmental impact studies, design phases, rights-of-way to acquire and yes, even lawsuits to wade through.

"Most projects take a couple years to environmentally clear, a couple years to design and between the two of them that's four years," said Dennis Fay, executive director of the Alameda County Congestion Management Agency. "And that's a fairly aggressive schedule, so the projects need to be fairly simple."

All that needs to go to the California Transportation Commission by Jan. 15, however, is a list of projects, each with a fairly accurate cost estimate and timetable for construction. But just getting that far takes a lot of work.

"We had to make the assumptions these bonds were going to pass, so we've been working on them since the summer," spending close to \$1 million to prepare the submissions.

Fay's agency actually has an earlier deadline. By Nov. 30, it must submit its projects to the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, which must decide on a master list for the entire nine-county Bay Area to the state commissioners before Jan. 15.

But project triage is further complicated by another deadline: Projects that benefit from Proposition 1B's corridor program must be under construction by 2012.

"The governor, when he introduced these bond programs, he wanted almost immediate improvements on the key corridors in the state," said Art Dao, deputy director of the Alameda County Transportation Improvement Authority, which decides how the county's transportation sales tax is spent.

Fortunately for Alameda and Contra Costa counties, there's a project so perfect for this hurry-up schedule that Gov. Schwarzenegger stood on its site to sign the legislation that put Proposition 1B on Tuesday's ballot.

"The Caldecott Tunnel is classic, because without the bond money, we can't build it," said Robert McCleary, executive director of the Contra Costa Transportation Authority. "I don't see another way within the current formula constraints."

The tunnel project is already underway with a final environmental impact statement expected this summer and construction to begin in 2009.

Those restrictions, under the auspices of the State Transportation Improvement Program, call for the California Transportation Commission to dole out money to each of California's 58 counties much like water might be rationed on a lifeboat.

"Our share of that formula in a good year might be \$25 million and in a bad year might be zero," McCleary said. And coming up with the \$175 million needed to complete the estimated \$420 million package for two more lanes of Caldecott Tunnel was out of the question until Proposition 1B was passed.

The bond measure will also fulfill a host of other needs, estimated by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission to pump \$4.5 billion into the Bay Area. The statewide package includes a \$4 billion public transit program, \$2 billion for trade corridors and ports, \$2 billion for local roads and another \$2 billion to beef up money handed out under the STIP.