

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Posted on Thu, Dec. 14, 2006

Transit bond funding under area microscope

By Erik N. Nelson
MEDIANEWS STAFF

For once, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission is in a position to offer millions of dollars worth of highway projects to all nine Bay Area counties simultaneously.

Although the draft list of projects to be funded out of the state's new \$20 billion transportation bond has something for everyone, several commissioners found the \$1.9 billion list lacking upon its introduction Wednesday.

Commission staff members focused upon the area's most congested corridors, first by building out the area's network of carpool lanes and then doing whatever feasible to ease traffic along troubled freeways such as Interstate 80 from the Carquinez Bridge to the Bay Bridge and Interstate 880 through Oakland.

Then there was the Caldecott Tunnel, a recognized bottleneck and a key corridor connecting Contra Costa County with Oakland, Berkeley and San Francisco. Contra Costa County officials succeeded in including on the MTC list \$175 million in bond money to fund the balance of a \$420 million fourth two-lane bore.

The money would come from the largest program within the bond, the Corridor Mobility Improvement Account, which has \$4.5 billion aimed at alleviating highway bottlenecks statewide. The commission plans to vote on a final list Jan. 10 in order to meet the California Transportation Commission's Jan. 16 deadline. Other parts of the bond, such as \$4 billion for public transit and \$2 billion each for trade corridors and local roads, give local officials a little more breathing room to submit projects.

The Caldecott Tunnel project was the poster child for the bond measure, even though Proposition 1B did not specify any Bay Area projects. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger stood on the Contra Costa side of the Caldecott to sign the bill that placed the bond measure on the Nov. 7 ballot.

But motorists only have to endure a total of 1,550 hours a day waiting on Highway 24 for the tunnel, while congestion on I-80, I-580, U.S. Highway 101 through San Mateo County and Highway 4 past Antioch average 7,850 hours each.

When John McLemore, who represents Santa Clara County cities on the commission, lamented the omission of \$237 million for widening U.S. 101 south of Gilroy, Alameda County Supervisor Scott Haggerty offered a somewhat rhetorical solution: "Alameda County got a project we didn't ask for," Haggerty said, earning groans from his fellow commissioners for his coy reference to the Caldecott Tunnel. "You can have the money."

Although Haggerty was pleased that Alameda County, which hosts more than a third of the area's freeway congestion, is on the list for \$269 million in carpool lanes on I-580 going west from Pleasanton and projects to improve traffic flow on I-880 and I-80, he said he would like to see the I-680/I-580 interchange improved as well.

"I consider myself to be between a rock and a hard place because I did want the flyover" to unweave traffic exiting from westbound I-580 to southbound I-680, Haggerty said after chairing Wednesday's MTC Programming and Allocations Committee.

"It's one of the most important projects in the Altamont Trade Corridor. However, there's only so much money," he said.

Sue Lempert, the commission's San Mateo County cities representative, cautioned against tinkering with the list because it already exceeds the bond measure's \$1.8 billion allotment for Northern California. She said that it would be better to stay within the bond measure's limits to assure that too many projects do not get rejected at the state level.

"I'm concerned that you're going to add something and we might not get anything at all," she said.