

# Rural areas fight Bay Area to fund traffic projects

By Erik N. Nelson  
MEDIANEWS STAFF

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 U.S. 101 through the hamlet of Willits.

He's now 55, and the traffic seems worse than ever.

Visitors from the Bay Area continue to throng summer events such as Humboldt County's "Reggae on the River" and flood through the town Pinches represents on the county Board of Supervisors.

He is thrilled, however, that a \$20 billion state transportation bond could unburden his town of decades of summer traffic jams.

However, Bay Area business and transportation leaders argue that closing the bypass project's \$150 million funding gap is not what California voters envisioned when they passed the bond Nov. 7.

While projects in the Bay Area could provide relief for hundreds of thousands of motorists, rural projects such as 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," he said. "It's affecting our economy and the quality of life for a large number of people."

According to a 2000 traffic congestion study included with the bypass funding request by Mendocino, Del Norte and Humboldt councils of governments, motorists would waste a combined 225 hours each rush hour in 2008 without the bypass.

Last year's Metropolitan Transportation Commission State of the System report on Bay Area highways showed that in 2004, eastbound Interstate 80 across the Bay Bridge into Emeryville — the least of the area's top 10 worst bottlenecks — exceeded that figure by a factor of 10.

The Bay Area's worst bottleneck, westbound I-80 from Highway 4 to the Bay 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 also are eligible, according to the California Transportation Commission.

The MTC 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 also is recommending six more rural "connectivity" projects — including the Willits Bypass — totaling \$462 million.

One of those projects, upgrading state Highway 12 to link Napa to I-80 for \$102 million, also is recommended by the MTC.

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."

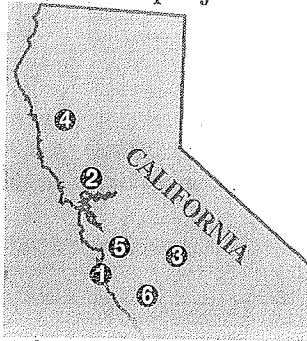
As written and enacted by California voters, the bond measure allows the Corridor Mobility program to fund a project that "improves the connectivity of the state highway system between rural, suburban and urban areas," as well as one that "improves mobility in a high-congestion corridor" or "improves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

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 transportation officials contend.

"Our issue is with the best use of the money," said Randy Rentschler, spokesman for the MTC. "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 re-

## Rural "connectivity corridor" projects



1. State Route 1; \$37 million, Monterey Freeway/Expressway Conversion
  2. SR 12, \$102 million, Napa/Solano Freeway/Expressway Conversion
  3. SR 41, \$45 million, Madera Freeway/Expressway Conversion
  4. US 101, \$150 million, Mendocino Willits Bypass
  5. SR 156, \$38 million, San Benito Freeway/Expressway Conversion
  6. SR 198, \$90 million, Kings/Tulare Freeway/Expressway Conversion
- TOTAL: \$462 million, Northern California\***

\*SR 198 is partly in Tulare County, which draws from Southern California's 60 percent share of the transportation bond's Corridor Mobility Improvement Account.

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quires the state commission to consider along with county and regional commission choices — involved anticipating future traffic issues that will spring from current growth patterns, explained Ross Chittenden, Caltrans' Proposition 1B program manager.

"We're trying to get ahead of the congestion curve, but it is also trying to address safety issues before they really pop up," he 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, Chittenden said, adding that freight shipments are often "pinched with sharp curves" or held up in places such as 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."

In Mendocino County, folks can see where Bay Area commuters may also contribute to Willits' logjams.

"People come up from the Bay Area, and they travel these roads," said Paul Cayler, Mendocino County deputy chief executive officer. According to the local traffic statistics, "most of it is interurban traffic, it's not the locals."

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

"It's backed up for miles outside of Willits," Cayler said. "They're all heading back to the Bay Area."