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Transit problems get federal forum

Pombo facilitates discussion about congested Valley roads with U.S. transportation secretary

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Inside Bay Area

PLEASANTON — Acting U.S. Secretary of Transportation Maria Cino heard an earful Thursday about the problems plaguing the area's freeways along the goods movement corridor extending from the Port of Oakland to the Central Valley.

Cino's visit to the Valley, prompted by Rep. Richard Pombo's invitation, was intended to give her a firsthand glimpse at the region's transportation needs and challenges.

"Getting out of Washington is a good thing for me because it really puts things in perspective, but also a face on what we all encounter each and every day," she said.

Pombo, a Tracy Republican, and Cino joined elected officials, transportation agency leaders and members of local business councils at a forum that furthered the agendas of a "Port to Port" Coalition — formed earlier this year — and other entities attempting to raise the profile of the region in the state and federal arenas.

"To me the message is getting through," Tri-Valley Business Council President Tom O'Malley said following the conclusion of the roundtable discussion at the Carr America Center in Pleasanton. "I'm very encouraged we have the federal authorities here paying attention and listening to what we're saying."

Pombo said from his point of view, traffic congestion on interstates 580 and 205 is one of the biggest issues facing the 11th Congressional District, which includes a majority of the Valley area.

"I believe that in the long run, we need a multi-pronged approach to deal with what has been a problem that has been compounding itself over the last 30 years," he said. "The only way we're going to solve that problem is by having all the local governments working together with the state and the federal government."

I-580 through the Livermore Valley is considered the Bay Area's second worst commute corridor in the morning and third worst in the afternoon, contributing to an average of 17,730 hours of daily delay.

However, the I-880/I-238/I-580 stretch that extends over the Altamont Pass into San Joaquin County will only be further pressed with the anticipated explosive population growth and when the number of containers coming into ports triples in the future because of increased trade, officials said.

"It's necessary to deal with this before it becomes an intolerable problem that would basically decimate the ability to move goods efficiently," said Henry McKay of the Port of Stockton.

Multiple Bay Area transportation agencies are looking at solutions that will involve various modes, including highway improvements, extending mass transit and increasing short-haul rail opportunities.

For the Valley, such solutions encompass the efforts to widen I-205, construct eastbound high-occupancy vehicle lanes on I-580 and build the west Dublin/Pleasanton BART station.

Other proposed improvements include purchasing right-of-way along I-580 from Dublin to Tracy for a future BART extension, building a flyover from westbound I-580 to I-680 and constructing I-580 truck-climbing lanes on the Altamont.

Many point to the need to enhance railways for both freight and passengers to take trucks and commuters off impacted highways, a highly touted but undeniably expensive and complex proposition.

Alameda County Supervisor Scott Haggerty, a vocal proponent of the need for I-580 improvements, said leaders must really become visionary about future plans because existing and proposed solutions are insufficient.

"We're applying a Band-Aid to really something that is undergoing major surgery," he said. "We are working backward. We are addressing problems that probably should have been addressed 15, 20 years ago."

Cino said she thinks there is not one way to remedy the problems being examined by local agencies, but that there are many "tools in the tool box" to address the region's needs that can help officials tackle the issues.

"A little does go a long way," she said. "It's not a solution, a total solution, but I think that it's something to strive for."