

[Close Window](#)[Send To Printer](#)

Article Last Updated: 9/28/2006 07:36 AM

Bay Area in dire need of transit fixes

Wish list for Prop. 1B funds includes another Caldecott bore

By Erik N. Nelson, STAFF WRITER
Inside Bay Area

OAKLAND — From opening another bore in the Caldecott Tunnel to extending BART into Silicon Valley to repairing potholes, the Bay Area has an urgent need of its share of a \$20 billion bond measure on the Nov. 7 ballot, area transportation officials said at a state Senate committee hearing Tuesday.

Proposition 1B is the biggest part of a \$37 billion package of infrastructure bonds placed on the ballot by the Legislature and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger as a "down payment" on correcting years of stingy funding for highways, transit, housing, schools and flood control.

"We now have a once-in-a-lifetime chance to shore up much neglected infrastructure in the state," said Lynette Sweet, vice president of the BART Board of Directors. "If we fail to take advantage of your hard work and this special opportunity, then we may fail to help make our state stronger."

Committee Chairman Alan Lowenthal, D-Long Beach, said he called the hearing at BART headquarters in Oakland and another in Los Angeles to help educate voters about the bond measure at a time when the governor's race and other political contests are competing for their attention.

Because the bond measure only mentions one specific transportation project — State Route 99 in the Central Valley — official pronouncements about the bond tend to be vague. Lowenthal, however, sought specific wish lists from Bay Area officials for what to do with the area's estimated \$2 billion share.

Contra Costa County Transportation Authority Vice Chairman Charles Abrams provided an extensive shopping list, starting with drilling a fourth two-lane bore for the Caldecott Tunnel connecting his county with Oakland.

The project already has \$225 million committed, including \$125 million from a new Contra Costa sales tax, and voter approval of Prop. 1B might provide the \$175 million still needed to get the project built, he said.

The bond also could provide millions more to help meet BART's

\$1.4 billion in capital needs and \$300 million sought by AC Transit, Abrams said.

The area will be getting a high proportion of the money — \$1.3 billion by Metropolitan Transportation Commission calculations — to aid transit because of the area's high level of bus and rail commuting.

Alameda County is suffering some of the area's worst congestion, along the Interstate 580 Corridor, something that county Supervisor and Metropolitan Transportation Commission member Scott Haggerty said he deals with each day as he commutes from his home in Livermore to his office in Oakland.

And the Bay Area is not just looking for a handout, Haggerty emphasized, noting that seven of the area's nine counties collect a half-cent sales tax to pay for transportation infrastructure, raising \$110 million a year.

"But we need the state and federal government to step up to the plate" and match those efforts if some of the area's major improvements are to be built. The bond measure "will not build our dreamhouse, this will not solve all of our problems," but it will make a lot more projects possible when used along with local funding as leverage to obtain funding from other sources.

One of the other things that the bond would accomplish, mostly through its \$4.5 billion Corridor Mobility Improvement Account, would be to fund major fixes to regional traffic congestion hot spots, said Suzanne Wilford Smith, executive director of the Sonoma County Transit Authority.

For example, building more capacity at the Interstate 80/Interstate 680 interchange could relieve a bottleneck that affects multiple counties, particularly Contra Costa, Napa, Solano and Alameda. But it is difficult under the normal state funding scheme for a small county such as Solano, where the problem is located, to come up with enough money to fix the problem, Smith said.

To provide a counterpoint to the overwhelmingly positive testimony about how vital the cash infusion would be to state and area infrastructure, the committee invited the libertarian Reason Foundation to speak on "Negative Impacts" of the infrastructure bond measures.

Foundation senior fellow George Passantino said he preferred not to be "negative" and would rather speak on "how to get the transportation system we deserve without the debt we all dread."

He suggested that with a state budget of \$100 billion a year, the state could afford to pony up \$5 billion each year to build more highways, which would be the best way to fight congestion.

Borrowing the money to fund little-used transit and to make minor highway improvements would be irresponsible, Passantino added:

"The voters are sort of like a family that has credit cards at their disposal, but they never get a monthly statement."