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Area may speed off with more money

Transportation bond still has \$15.4 billion to parcel out

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Inside Bay Area

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Now that the angst-ridden process of dividing up \$4.5 billion in highway money from the \$19.9 billion transportation bond is over, Bay Area transportation officials can set their sights on the other \$15.4 billion.

The rush for highway money was unprecedented in its tight deadlines, mandated by the bond measure worked out last year between Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and legislative leaders. The measure set March 1 as the date that the California Transportation Commission had to pick highway projects. The panel managed to finish a day early while soothing the state's angry urban centers with hundreds of millions of dollars in projects the commission's staff hadn't recommended.

The Bay Area's lobbying effort was so effective that it scored more highway money (\$1.29 billion) from the Corridor Mobility Improvement Account than did Los Angeles County (\$1.19 billion), home to three million more people and the nation's highest level of freeway congestion.

While there is no such hurry to process nominations for the remaining transportation bond money, state officials aim to get most of it done before this fiscal year ends in June and all of it decided by December, said Ross Chittenden, Caltrans' Proposition 1B program manager.

The next decision covers \$1 billion for long overdue improvements to state Highway 99 through the San Joaquin Valley. Projects for that highway could be approved by the state commission as early as its March 14-15 meeting in Sacramento, Chittenden said.

Then comes the \$2 billion infusion of cash into the State Transportation Improvement Program. The STIP is doled out according to each county's population and miles of state highway lanes. In recent years, it has been a modest affair every two years, with each county getting barely enough to fund the most trivial of improvements.

But the bond money will make the program meaningful enough for Alameda County to add \$10 million to \$12 million it already has committed to a \$91 million project to correct problems with Interstate 880 at 29th Avenue in Oakland.

The idea is to quickly win a commitment for \$20 million in federal funding for the project, and use that to win matching funds under still another Proposition 1B program, said Dennis Fay, executive director of the Alameda County Congestion Management Agency.

The match would come, if the state commission agrees, from the \$2 billion Trade Corridor Improvement Fund, Fay said. I-880 could qualify for those funds because so much of the truck traffic from the Port of Oakland uses the I-880/238/580/205 corridor to get to Stockton and points east.

Mindful that its commuters also use that corridor, the Contra Costa County Transportation Authority is also warm to the idea of seeking Trade Corridor money for that corridor, said Paul Maxwell, the authority's chief deputy executive director for projects.

Nearly everyone involved with the process of picking highway projects was rankled to some extent by the process, and are hoping for a less contentious selection for the Trade Corridor program, which will not be decided until the first half of 2008.

"I think given the general concern over the process that was used for the initial bond issue, I think there's a sense that we don't want that to happen again, that it needs to be much more smooth," Maxwell said.

In Santa Clara County, where officials did not come away from the highway process as pleased as their East Bay counterparts, there's hope that the bond's other programs will yield more projects, such as the widening of U.S. Highway 101 in Gilroy, along with improving the Highway 25 interchange, said Jayme Kunz, spokeswoman for the county's Valley Transportation Authority.

Some of the funds could come from the county's share of the \$2 billion STIP Augmentation, and could possibly be used to obtain matching funds from other programs.

In June, counties should also know what share they're getting from the bond's

\$625 million addition to the State Highway Operation and Protection Program, which will be used to replace worn-out pavement. That month the commission is also slated to decide how to spend \$400 worth of improvements to inter-city railroads in the state.

The schedule has yet to be set for several large programs within the bond.

That includes the \$3.6 billion public transit program, half of which will be distributed to transit agencies according to their size and the other half to local transportation agencies, such as the Metropolitan Transportation Commission in the case of the Bay Area, for them to allocate as they see fit.

Also yet to be scheduled is the distribution of \$2 billion in local streets and roads money, along with \$1 billion from the Transit System Safety, Security and Disaster Response Account.

Another program of critical importance to the Bay Area, the \$1 billion State-Local Partnership Program Account, won't be allocated until the state legislature approves guidelines. The program is intended to benefit "self-help" counties that raise much of their own transportation money, as do seven of the nine Bay Area counties with half-cent sales taxes.

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