

CTC should rethink highway congestion list

THE California Transportation Commission, hopefully, feels the heat and gets the message.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and officials from the Bay Area and Los Angeles want the commission to reconsider which road projects to fund with \$4.5 billion in voter-approved bond money.

The worst fears for Bay Area business and transportation leaders were confirmed when the CTC released staff recommendations on the allocation of infrastructure improvement money approved by voters for congestion relief on Nov. 7. There are at least two problems with staff recommendations for the so-called Corridor Mobility Improvement Account:

▶ Only \$2.8 billion of the \$4.5 billion is being allocated this year, the balance is held for another round of funding in 2008. Schwarzenegger and others feel the whole amount should be granted now.

▶ Both the Bay Area and Los Angeles, the state's two major urban centers and hubs of traffic congestion within the state, were shortchanged.

In spite of the fact that 85 percent of Northern California's congestion is in the Bay Area, the CTC staff recommended that only \$707 million of its projects be funded. That's less than half of the \$1.5 billion recommended by Caltrans and one-third of the \$2 billion sought by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission.

Likewise, the Los Angeles area, which has about 30 percent of the state's population, is to get only 11 percent of the funds.

A disproportionate part of the money is designated for rural projects serving much smaller populations with fewer, less-pressing congestion problems. Part of the rationale seems to be that smaller, rural projects can be completed faster than bigger, more complex urban upgrades. They also help complete our interstate highway system and improve so-called "connectivity" between rural and urban areas.

Thus the Willits Bypass, which would reroute Highway 101 around Willits in Mendocino County, got the third-highest allotment — \$175 million to complete the project. But Interstate 580, a major connector between the Bay Area and Central Valley, for which MTC sought \$200 million, gets only \$60 million.

"What we were afraid of appears to be happening," said Jim Wunderman of the Bay Area Council. "The state agency is making a priority of rural projects that really don't address the congestion that has an incredible economic impact on the state."

CTC's staff recommended money be spent on nine of the 30 projects Bay Area officials deemed essential to relieving traffic bottlenecks. Though it recommends funds for drilling a fourth bore of the Caldecott Tunnel, widening Highway 4 in Contra Costa County and adding a carpool lane to eastbound Interstate 580 in the Tri-Valley; such major arteries as I-80, I-580, I-680, the Doyle Drive approach to the Golden Gate Bridge, and the Marin-Sonoma Narrows on Highway 101 are shortchanged or ignored.

Noting that, "The Bay Area has significant transportation needs," Schwarzenegger came to our defense, telling the commission, whose members he appoints, that the staff's list "should be reconsidered."

We agree wholeheartedly. The commission should, before meeting to make its decision on Wednesday, reject the staff's recommendation, allocate all the funds now; and tilt it toward relief of traffic congestion, thus increasing allocations for the Bay Area.

Altering rules for the allocation of bond money after the Nov. 7 election, as CTC did, amounts to subversion of the election process and undermines public faith in the people entrusted with executing its wishes. That could come back to bite state officials in the future.