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CTC's reversal a boon to Bay Area commuters

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IN the end, common sense and the squeaky wheel prevailed. The California Transportation Commission not only heard the public outcry to change its allocation of

\$4.5 billion in congestion relief funds, it got the message.

That was borne out Wednesday when CTC meted out the first block of money from the infrastructure bond package approved by voters in November. The bulk of \$4.5 billion in Corridor Mobility Improvement Account funds will go — as intended — to relieve gnarled traffic on roads serving the busiest areas of the state — the Bay Area and Los Angeles.

The outcome is as it should be — a complete reversal of the CTC staff's recommendations two weeks prior, which gave rural areas with relatively minor congestion problems near equal billing with urban centers. It might serve the CTC well to now determine how its staff's perspective got so far out of whack in the first place.

The original plan triggered an avalanche of protests from Bay Area business and transportation leaders, lawmakers, citizens, the press and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who asked CTC to reconsider. CTC yielded to the pressure, boosting the Bay Area's share from the original \$700 million proposal to \$1.1 billion on Monday and \$1.29 billion Wednesday.

Saddled with 85 percent of the congestion problems in Northern California, the Bay Area will get 70 percent of the transportation funds. Add another \$405 million that Caltrans Director Will Kempton diverted to the Doyle Drive approach to the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco and the Bay Area received its fair share.

Finding Mendocino County's congestion needs less compelling, commissioners also axed the staff-recommended \$177 million Willits bypass. That put enough additional money on the Bay Area's platter to approve the widening of the Novato Narrows on Highway 101 in Marin County, add a westbound carpool lane on I-580 between Greenville Road in Livermore and Foothill Road in Dublin, and install merge lanes at the Highway 101/I-580 interchange in San Rafael.

Eighteen Bay Area projects will get bond money. Among them are carpool lanes on Interstate 80, roadwork between the Bay and Carquinez bridges, and building a carpool lane on I-880 between Hegenberger Road in Oakland and Marina Boulevard in San Leandro. The I-580 corridor connecting the Bay Area and Central Valley will get carpool lanes in both directions between Livermore and Pleasanton-Dublin. The Caldecott Tunnel linking Alameda and Contra Costa counties gets its fourth bore. Congestion along the San Francisco peninsula should be relieved by merging lanes at Embarcadero and Marsh roads in San Mateo County as well as widening Yerba Buena between I-280 and I-680 in Santa Clara.

The CTC's reversal constitutes "a big win," says Randy Rentschler of the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, which along with the Bay Area Council of business executives spearheaded the effort to reverse the original recommendation. When the projects are done, "People who travel on 80, 880, 580 and 101 are going to get to spend more time with their families."

Work on the projects will start in the next couple of years. But traffic congestion isn't going to become a thing of the past. One study estimates that California needs to invest \$120 billion to upgrade its highways.

Thus, \$4.5 billion marks just the beginning of our reinvestment in highways. Bob McCleary of the Contra Costa Transportation Authority calls it "a small down payment."

Getting the original recommendations changed necessitated a big effort, but may ultimately lead to commuters spending less time idling in traffic. That lifestyle improvement is long overdue.