

## California road funds could face rough ride

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THERE may, or may not, have been any cosmic significance to two large, simultaneous and adjacent human assemblages in downtown Sacramento on Tuesday — but the gathering of bicycling devotees for the end of a major race and a heated hearing on financing new state highway projects at least formed an interesting juxtaposition.

Some contend that were more Californians to use bicycles or their own feet for transportation, it would negate the need to build more highways. Even the most ardent advocates of non-automotive transportation, however, concede that Californians will remain overwhelmingly dependent on cars for many years to come, as well as goods-hauling trucks.

And with continued high levels of population growth, Californias badly neglected and immensely congested roadway system must absorb millions more vehicles every decade.

Thats the reality that packed a large auditorium with lobbyists, local government officials, transportation planners and civic leaders — all seeking bigger pieces of the nearly

\$20 billion in transportation bonds that Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, the Legislature and voters approved last year.

The state Transportation Commission is almost ready to designate which among hundreds of competing highway projects will receive the first allocation of bond funds, and its hearing was an opportunity for project advocates to complain about how the commissions staff proposed to divvy up \$2.8 billion.

Most of the complainers were from Californias major urban areas, lamenting that their major congestion relief projects were being given short shrift in favor of those in suburban and rural communities — and powerful urban politicians such as Assembly Speaker Fabian Nunez of Los Angeles were doing more than complaining.

Even before the commission convened, Nunez summoned the commissions top staffer, John Barna, into his office for a private gripe session. Afterwards, he and Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa told reporters that if they werent satisfied with how the commission acted, the Legislature would intervene.

We just want to make it perfectly clear, Nunez said. The Assembly will not appropriate funds in the bonds, or in the budget, that do not adequately address Californias traffic congestion problem.

Barna, Nunez said, agreed to reconsider Los Angeles top-priority project, new lanes for highly congested Interstate 405, that had been left off the staffs list.

As Nunez and Villaraigosa depict it, Los Angeles County, with more than a quarter of the states population and even more of its traffic congestion, would receive just 12 percent of the initial money.

Dan Walters writes for the Sacramento Bee.

Officials from San Diego and the San Francisco Bay Area are uttering similar complaints and in a letter to the commission, Schwarzenegger backed the urban interests, listed specific projects he wants included and urged that more money be committed quickly.

The underlying problem, of course, is that despite the seeming size of the bond issue, its a small fraction of what California needs to bring its long-neglected roadway system up to snuff. Nunez says hes willing to put another \$5 billion transportation bond on the 2008 ballot if needed, but that, in comparative terms, is just another drop in the bucket.

Meanwhile, by threatening to withhold legislative approval, the speaker is telling transportation officials, in effect, that the preferences of powerful urban politicians must be given special attention, thus coming dangerously close to the pork-barrel allocation that advocates of the bonds told voters they wouldnt tolerate.

We want a process thats not politicized, Nunez insisted, while in the next breath threatening political intervention if hes not satisfied.

Dan Walters writes for the Sacramento Bee.