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## Deadline met: Billions parsed out for freeways

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BEFORE California voters passed the largest public works bond in American history last November, they heard that a big chunk of the money for new transportation projects would be heading out the door with extraordinary speed. The state was supposed to approve the first

\$4.5 billion from the \$20 billion bond by Thursday, less than four months after the election.

Well, it wasn't pretty, but the California Transportation Commission met its deadline. Acting on Feb. 28, the panel adopted a plan for spending a pot of money dedicated by the voters to removing bottlenecks on state highways and improving connections between cities and towns.

Billions more from the bond — known as Proposition 1B — will go for public transit, intercity rail, local streets and highways, air quality improvements and speeding the movement of truck traffic from the state's booming ports.

But the first piece was the highest profile, because it promised an immediate infusion of cash to widen freeways and build interchanges, improving mobility in a system that in recent years has been starved for new money to add capacity.

The process set off a feeding frenzy among local transportation agencies eager for money to complete projects on the drawing boards for years, in some cases decades. When the commission's staff initially recommended spending only a portion of the available money this year, state and local politicians mounted a short, furious lobbying push to make sure that every dime was distributed. In the end, it was.

The final list didn't satisfy everyone. In a couple of cases, small towns with big needs got shoved aside by urban areas with more congestion — and more clout. But the result is likely to produce a noticeable reduction in urban traffic delays, or at least prevent backups from worsening as the population grows.

"This is really a down payment," Marian Bergeson, the chairwoman of the Transportation Commission, told me last week. "As much money as it is, it's not going to solve all the problems in transportation in California."

By law, the money had to be split geographically, with 60 percent going to more populated Southern California and 40 percent going to the north state. Beyond that, however, the commission had wide discretion to choose among urban and rural areas and to decide how much of a project's budget the bond would finance.

That flexibility led to a more wide-open process. And, ironically, a decision by the commission's staff to not engage in private negotiations with local transportation planners led to a very public airing of political priorities as the list of projects was vetted, expanded and tweaked. That sort of transparency is probably a good thing. It's certainly better than having all of the decisions made behind closed doors. But it is a turn-off to purists who think that politics can somehow be removed from decision-making in a democracy.

It also heightened the disappointment of a handful of communities that first learned they had been recommended by the professional staff for funding, then removed from the list by the political appointees on the Transportation Commission.

The big losers were the people of Mendocino County, who thought that a long-awaited bypass for Highway 101 around the town of Willits would finally be funded. That project was dropped from the final package, and the area will have few other options for finding the \$177 million it needs for the job.

A similar fate befell another project on the 101 in San Luis Obispo County. That one would have added one lane in each direction to the Santa Maria River Bridges. Now, it might never be built.

Several other projects that ended up on the cutting room floor could find a spot in future allocations from the bond.

A proposal for a four-lane divided expressway in rural Imperial County near Brawley fell off the list but might get funded from a pot of money reserved for easing truck traffic caused by international trade. That stretch of road, planners say, is clogged with big rigs coming into California after crossing the Mexican border. A project to widen bridges and replace interchanges on Interstate 10 in San Bernardino County might win the same treatment.

All of those projects and more were sacrificed mainly to make room for one very expensive addition, a \$730 million proposal to build a northbound car pool lane along 10 miles of Interstate 405 in Los Angeles. That project was the highest priority of Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and Assembly Speaker Fabian Nunez, and they enlisted another Los Angeleno, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, to back the effort.

The pressure campaign was very public and very blunt, with Nunez threatening to hold up the entire package in the Legislature if the project was not added to the list. But the project was not the kind of wasteful pork that larded up the most recent federal transportation bill. The 405 in Los Angeles is the most congested freeway in the nation, and Caltrans recommended that the project be funded from the bond. It will be.

Construction is scheduled to begin in 2009.

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