

pressdemocrat.com

This is a printer friendly version of an article from www.pressdemocrat.com
To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

<<Back

Article published - Feb 7, 2007

Fierce fight for local road projects

County officials part of intense lobbying by agencies statewide trying to get share of \$4.5 billion

By [Bob Norberg](#)

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

It's the biggest pot of discretionary money the California Transportation Commission has had to spend in a decade: \$4.5 billion.

"With very few rules and restrictions, this is a sweepstakes program," said Randy Rentschler, a spokesman for the Metropolitan Transportation Commission. "This thing is wide open."

So the process is ripe for pork barrel politics, and it should be no surprise that there is intense lobbying by county officials, regional planners, politicians and special interest groups.

Sonoma County wants \$351 million to widen 32½ miles of Highway 101, including stretches between Santa Rosa and Windsor, Rohnert Park and Cotati and Petaluma and Novato.

Rentschler's agency endorsed Sonoma County's request, but Caltrans recommended \$284 million and local officials are now among those lobbying for money.

"I know some of those guys up there, the staff, and they're not sleeping and they are not eating," said Suzanne Smith, executive director of the Sonoma County Transportation Authority.

It's not quite that bad, but it's close, said John Barna, executive director of the state Transportation Commission.

"We are getting letters right and left, our commissioners are getting 'briefed.' But we have let the world know from a staff perspective, 'Let us do our job,'" Barna said. "Any time there are dollars on the table, regional agencies' board members, all elected officials ... feel a desire to weigh in; it is all part of the process."

At stake is \$4.5 billion, the first release of a \$20 billion bond measure approved by voters in November.

Unlike the vast majority of state and federal highway funding, which is restricted in how it can be allocated, the \$4.5 billion is simply designated for ready-to-build projects that will relieve highway congestion or increase safety.

The only other restriction is that 60 percent of the money goes to Southern California and 40 percent to Northern California.

From the state commission's perspective, Barna said, "we are looking for projects that deliver benefits. The voters want congestion relief in areas of the state where facilities are not up to freeway standards or there are bottlenecks."

The Novato Narrows, a \$349 million project that is too big for Sonoma or Marin County to tackle alone, is a prime example of an investment that would show an immediate return, Barna said.

The state staff is evaluating 147 projects nominated by regional transportation agencies and Caltrans.

The requests far exceed the money available. The regional agencies have submitted \$11.3 billion in requests, while Caltrans' list is \$6.4 billion.

"It is absolutely 12 pounds of projects for a 10-pound bag," said John McLemore of Santa Clara, chairman of the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, the regional planning agency for the nine Bay Area counties.

The state commission's staff will release its recommendation Feb. 16. A public hearing will be held Feb. 20 in Sacramento, and the nine-member state commission will make the final decision Feb. 28 in Irvine.

"There will be whining and crying and gnashing of teeth," Barna said.

The Metropolitan Transportation Commission list for the Bay Area totals \$2 billion, including the \$351 million for Sonoma County. Projects include car-pool lanes from the Petaluma Bridge through the Novato Narrows, from Wilfred Avenue in Rohnert Park to Railroad Avenue in Cotati and from Steele Lane in Santa Rosa to central Windsor.

The Caltrans recommendation eliminates the Highway 101 widening through Rohnert Park and Airport Boulevard interchange improvements.

The state commission has not had this much discretion in spending transportation funds since 1997, when the Legislature, in a move to take the politics out of transportation funding, transferred the decision-making power to the regional transportation agencies.

"We are trying to keep this from becoming a pork barrel process, but I am afraid there will be some pork," said Bob Jehn, a Cloverdale councilman and county Transportation Authority member. "The requests exceed the amount available by more than double. There will be some intense lobbying."

A week ago, the county agency's Smith met with state staff members and some commissioners, and Jehn and another Sonoma County official will address the commission during the Feb. 20 hearing.

Assemblywoman Noreen Evans, D-Santa Rosa, sent a letter on behalf of North Bay legislators to the commissioners supporting the Metropolitan Transportation Commission list and local projects.

"You can be sure they are being lobbied, but we are leaving it up to the transportation authorities of the three counties, Sonoma, Napa and Solano. We are not trying to meet with the commissioners," said state Sen. Pat Wiggins, D-Santa Rosa, who signed the Evans letter.

The only other discretionary funding over the next five years is \$1 billion for counties that can match the allocations through a self-imposed tax or fees and \$2 billion for projects that improve "trade corridors."

That heightens the sense of urgency to get projects funded under the \$4.5 billion release.

"People believe this will be a once-in-a-decade experience," Rentschler said, "and if you don't get your money now, you won't get it for a long time."

WISH LIST

Sonoma County highway funding requests include:

Car-pool lanes from Steele Lane

in Santa Rosa to Windsor,

\$95 million.

Car-pool lanes from Wilfred Avenue in Rohnert Park to Railroad Avenue in Cotati, \$86 million.

Car-pool lanes from Petaluma River bridge through the Novato Narrows and conversion of existing lane to car-pool to San Rafael, \$170 million.

Last changed: Feb 7, 2007 © The Press Democrat. For copyright information view our [User Agreement](#)