

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Posted on Sat, Mar. 03, 2007

GUEST COMMENTARY

Governor's Strategic Growth Plan now speeding along

By Will Kempton
GUEST COMMENTARY

JUST LAST year, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger proposed a comprehensive Strategic Growth Plan to help overcome decades of underinvestment in the state's infrastructure, and he worked with the Legislature to place it on the ballot.

In November, the voters overwhelmingly approved the plan, including \$19.9 billion in general obligation bonds for transportation.

I am pleased to say that the Strategic Growth Plan is speeding along, which is good news for motorists.

This week the California Transportation Commission voted to allocate \$1.29 billion in Proposition 1B bond money toward projects in the Bay Area that will uncork bottlenecks on interstates 580, 880 and 80 as well as U.S. Highway 101 and state highways 4 and 24.

Statewide, \$4.5 billion from the Corridor Mobility Improvement Account was allocated for projects that will relieve congestion.

The projects will relieve traffic congestion, improve highway safety, expand capacity through high occupancy vehicle and mixed-flow lanes, construct critical interchanges, upgrade HOV direct connectors, improve interregional connectivity, and improve the productivity of California's overall transportation network using the latest technology.

Projects will be balanced overall between Northern and Southern California and use the latest technology.

Recently, Schwarzenegger and San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom toured Doyle Drive on the U.S. 101 corridor to see firsthand where funds from the Strategic Growth Plan are being used and to discuss other projects on the corridor that are receiving transportation bond funds.

Doyle Drive will receive \$405 million of State Highway Operation Project Program funds.

In addition, the Corridor Mobility Improvement Account investment in the Bay Area on the U.S. 101 corridor was an additional \$400 million, for a total of more than \$800 million in bond funds.

In the next decade, the Strategic Growth Plan's transportation component will result in more than 515 miles of new HOV lanes, 700 miles of new highway lanes, 480 miles of new commuter lines and big increases in transit and intercity rail rider ship use.

The Strategic Growth Plan will use bonds to leverage private, federal and local resources -- thereby multiplying the total funds available for transportation infrastructure.

This year, the governor will seek legislation to allow public-private partnerships and work for reforms to make the approval of the crucial projects more efficient. The Schwarzenegger administration's goal is to enact reforms such as design-build and design sequencing.

Ultimately, the administration wants these reforms and investments to advance projects that reduce traffic congestion as well as pollution and improve safety and system operations.

We also will work to ensure accountability in how the bond money is spent. The governor has issued an executive order that puts forth a three-point plan to ensure that there is accountability in the best interests of the people of California, in how the state is spending bond funds for infrastructure improvements -- not only for the bonds that California voters approved in November, but also for those he is asking the Legislature to approve for the 2008 and 2010 ballots.

His three-point accountability plan incorporates responsibility throughout the funding process that will govern expending bond funds -- both those that are approved and those that are proposed -- because it covers all three of the stages when the state deals with the bond funds for critical infrastructure.

The first phase involves "front-end accountability" before the bond funds are spent. This is where the state agencies and departments with responsibility for spending bond funds lay out clear criteria, or the laws, rules and processes that will govern how the bond money is spent. And where it's appropriate, the governor's executive order calls for performance standards or outcome measures to be laid out.

The second phase involves "in-progress accountability" as bond funds are being spent. It requires semi-annual reports to the state Department of Finance on how the actions being taken are ensuring that projects funded from bond proceeds are being carried out in a timely fashion and achieving their intended purposes.

The third phase involves "follow-up accountability," in which there will be regular audits to determine whether bond proceeds have been spent in accordance with the criteria that were laid out at the front end, and whether they achieved all of the outcomes that were set out at the beginning.

All of these three phases are important to ensure the state is doing right by the people in terms of its prudent management and expenditure of the bond funds that the voters have approved and that we ask be approved.

But if the people don't have easy access to this information, it's nothing more than a report collecting dust on a shelf. That's why the governor's executive order calls for all of this information to be posted on the Internet in a readily accessible format so the people to whom we are accountable can see for themselves how their money is being spent.

Through these measures, and through the continued leadership of Schwarzenegger and the Legislature, the Strategic Growth Plan is moving from bold vision to concrete reality, and in the process we are moving California forward into the future.

The Strategic Growth Plan is setting priorities on needed investments and leveraging additional funds from non-state sources -- especially when coupled with a focus on performance measures to reduce congestion and improve mobility.

Once only a vision, the Strategic Growth Plan is becoming the concrete transportation projects for California's tomorrow.

I'm proud to say that Schwarzenegger has had such a meaningful and leading role in making that vision a reality.

Kempton is director of Caltrans.

© 2007 ContraCostaTimes.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.contracostatimes.com>