

How to spell traffic relief

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ONE OF the appealing aspects of state Proposition 1B, the \$19.9 billion transportation bond approved by voters in November, was that it did not attempt to "buy" votes by promising to fund pet projects throughout California.

Instead, the supporters of 1B, which included Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and top legislative leaders, assured voters that specific spending priorities would be determined in a fair process. The directives in the ballot measure were kept intentionally broad: such as requiring that 60 percent of the money be spent in the more populated southern half of the state, with the north getting a 40 percent share. The measure also guaranteed that portions of the money would be spent on public transit, congestion relief, trade corridors, air quality local roads and other general categories.

Beyond those very general guidelines, Californians were assured that transportation planners would evaluate individual projects on the merits.

The first big test of whether this covenant with the voters will be kept comes this week when the California Transportation Commission is expected to decide on the first wave of spending decisions, about \$5.5 billion. The bulk of that money is supposed to go to projects in a category designated as "corridor mobility," a transportation planner's term for congestion relief.

The Metropolitan Transportation Commission has come up with a set of priorities for the Bay Area that zeroes in on some of the all-too-familiar chokepoints around the region: a fourth bore for the Caldecott Tunnel, more carpool lanes on perpetually clogged sections of U.S. 101 in the North Bay, carpool lanes in the I-580 quagmire from Pleasanton to Livermore.

Altogether, the MTC priorities would consume about 85 percent of the north's share of the initial funding. While that may sound a bit greedy, MTC planners point out that the nine-county region does contain up to 90 percent of the congestion in the north. The MTC arguments are certainly more plausible than the Caltrans plan to commit almost half of these precious funds to less-populated areas.

The key to the credibility of these major bond programs is to spend the money in a way that delivers tangible results that voters can see and appreciate. In this case, it means the money should follow the congestion.

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