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Leaders to beg for rethinking of road funding

By Gary Richards
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When voters last fall approved a \$20 billion bond measure to fix California's aging highway system, supporters heralded it as the biggest transportation investment in more than 15 years.

They were right. But the state's traffic needs are so great that the dollars are just a drop in the bucket -- as officials were painfully reminded last week.

Today, leaders from across the state will convene in Sacramento to plead for more money from the California Transportation Commission, whose first proposed allocation Friday of \$4.5 billion in bond spending met with howls from Los Angeles to the Bay Area.

"This is unfair," said Jim Wunderman, president of the Bay Area Council, a regional business organization. "It doesn't make any sense."

The reaction should come as no surprise. The state's transportation program is "in crisis and on the verge of collapse," according to a CTC report issued two years ago. During the next decade, the state faces a shortfall now estimated at \$160 billion in unmet needs.

And that shortfall only covers state roads, said Carl Guardino, chief executive officer of the Silicon Valley Leadership Group, who will join the CTC board next month. "That excludes local improvements like local streets and roads and county expressways, as well as federal projects," he said.

The new list of CTC staff recommendations means dangerous and outdated bottlenecks such as the interchange of Interstates 280 and 880 in San Jose and the I-80, I-680 and Highway 12 interchange in Solano County are no longer in line for immediate funding -- delaying major improvements by a decade or perhaps longer.

Even agencies that the CTC report recommended get money from the state are unhappy. East Bay leaders were stunned to get just \$60 million for Interstate 580 -- the second-most-congested highway in the region -- instead of the \$200 million they wanted. In Monterey County, the CTC recommended setting aside \$26 million to fix the perilous intersection at Highway 1 and Salinas Road -- \$11 million short of the \$37 million needed.

"I don't know how I fund 70 percent of the construction of a project," said Debbie Hale, executive director of the Transportation Agency of Monterey County. "We need to fund 100 percent."

The CTC will vote on its recommendations Feb. 28 in Irvine. Changes are sure to be made after today's hearing, and Valley Transportation Authority officials hope widening Highway 101 south of Gilroy will get moved up in the funding process. The CTC recommended that it be put off for consideration until next year.

The usual ways to pay for road improvements appear limited. The state last raised the tax on gasoline in the early 1990s, doubling it to 18 cents per gallon. That measure passed partly due to Republican Gov. George Deukmejian, who gave traffic reports across the state from helicopters to deliver home the congestion commuters faced each day.

"I have not heard statewide leaders calling for a gas tax increase to make up for the transportation shortfall," Guardino said. "It is a fair question to ask, however, as we consider all of our options to keep California moving."

But Eileen Goodwin, a traffic consultant who oversaw the completion of Highway 85 in 1994, said she does not sense "a push for a gas tax from the general voting public yet. I really don't sense an urgency out in the more suburban, rural areas especially, which I would think would be necessary to pass something statewide."

In addition, passing more countywide sales taxes is much more difficult than in 1984, when Santa Clara County became the first county in California to tax itself to help pay for state highway upgrades. Such measures now need approval by two-thirds of voters, not a simple majority. Last year, tax measures in Santa Clara, Monterey, Santa Cruz, Sonoma and Marin counties failed to get a "super majority" vote.

State voters last fall did approve shifting the sales tax on gas purchases to traffic needs, a move that will raise \$1.3 billion a year. It helps, said Andy Chesley, executive director of the San Joaquin Council of Governments. But it's not enough.

"The state's investment in transportation has been falling well short of what is necessary," he said. "And we are only falling behind at

an ever increasing rate."

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