

[Close Window](#)[Send To Printer](#)

Playing politics with infrastructure funds

Article Launched:01/21/2007 07:05:28 AM PST

THE prospect that politics could play a role in the distribution of the first dollars from Proposition 1B, the \$20 billion transportation bond approved by voters in November, has caused concern among Bay Area transportation and business officials.

In question is \$4.5 billion in Corridor Mobility Improvement Account funds that are supposed to be used specifically to relieve traffic congestion. By the state's formula, Northern California should get about 40 percent of those funds, or \$1.8 billion.

And, since nine Bay Area counties are home to the most congested roads in Northern California — 83 percent — the Metropolitan Transportation Commission and Bay Area Council assumed that we'd get about 83 percent of the \$1.8 billion.

But on Nov. 8, the day after the election, the California Transportation Commission altered guidelines somewhat, enabling it to distribute funds more widely and channel more dollars toward finishing our interstate highway system. That could reroute a sizable sum to less-congested rural areas.

The Bay Area Council sent a letter to CTC registering its concern with "an unfortunate and inappropriate course that diverges from the one adopted by the Legislature and governor and resoundingly approved by California voters." Bay Area Council CEO Jim Wunderman fears a substantial portion of the \$1.8 billion may go to "regional programming targets" and Caltrans' "outdated highway system plan."

Meanwhile, MTC has approved a Bay Area proposal for congestion funds consisting of 22 projects. They would add and expand HOV lanes, widen roads, improve interchanges, initiate the fourth bore for the Caldecott Tunnel, upgrade access to the Golden Gate Bridge, add truck-climbing lanes on the Altamont Pass and otherwise relieve traffic congestion. Long-delayed work on segments of highways in or near Oakland, Pleasanton, Hayward, Fremont, Livermore, Palo Alto, Richmond, San Mateo, and along the 880 and 101 corridors, are part of the package.

Planning for these projects is done. What's needed is funds to pay for them. In fact, funding has been so scarce that Wunderman and MTC head Steve Heminger say "money has been a bigger problem than planning."

The need is obvious. Efforts to divert congestion relief funds to Highway 99 and other inland projects would be an after-election gambit counter to the original plan approved by voters.

It would be similar to what the U.S. Department of Homeland Security did with antiterrorism funds. Rather than basing funding decisions on a city or area's risk of terrorist attacks, DHS tried to please everyone by giving all parts of the country some money, even if it was a rural district with no terrorist targets. It took several years to get that ill-conceived choice changed, and there's still no guarantee it will happen.

By altering "corridor mobility" criteria, members of the CTC could do something similar by routing funds to areas of the state with minor congestion problems. To do so on Feb. 28, the day CTC is to adopt its program, would be a questionable use of voter-approved funds.

Such Bay Area legislators as Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata of Oakland, Sen. Tom Torlakson (Antioch) of the Transportation and Housing Committee, Assemblymen Guy Houston of Livermore, Joe Simitian of Palo Alto and Sandre Swanson of Oakland need to protect the Bay Area from such a raid on funds.

CTC should follow the original plan, objectives and intent of Proposition 1B and not divert congestion relief funds away from the Bay Area. If such a diversion happens this early in the allotment of bond money, it will set a bad precedent that could continually plague the infrastructure rebuilding process financed by the \$37 billion bond package.