
Posted on Wed, Feb. 21, 2007

Put money where it will help most

URBAN AREAS NEED BULK OF STATE'S \$20 BILLION FOR CONGESTION RELIEF

Mercury News Editorial

What if Californians agreed to spend \$20 billion to relieve traffic congestion and, a decade later, discovered it hadn't made a whit of difference?

That is a grave danger, unless the California Transportation Commission overrules its staff and agrees to put taxpayers' money where the problems are. In Northern California, that means primarily in Silicon Valley and the rest of the Bay Area.

The argument could be dismissed as parochial, but it is not. The Bay Area is one of the main economic engines for California. Failure to make a noticeable difference in traffic congestion here will reverberate through the state budget as start-ups and growth companies take their jobs to Phoenix, Austin and beyond.

Voters passed the bond in November, and the first \$4.5 billion in spending will be approved by the transportation commission Feb. 28. The staff recommendation seriously short-changed urban areas, from Los Angeles to Silicon Valley, even though voters were promised that high-congestion areas would be the top priority for bond funds.

Fortunately, Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez and Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata have added clout to Bay Area pleas.

Perata so far is registering polite concern. Núñez is livid, threatening to block appropriations to projects unless the commission better addresses congestion in the areas that drive the state's economy. In Southern California, he wants help for the 24-hour bottleneck that is Interstate 405 (or *the* 405, in the local parlance) and a fair share of spending generally in Los Angeles. But he's also demanding more for the Bay Area and San Diego.

A tug of war over highway money is inevitable given the decades of neglect. Two years ago, the commission identified \$160 billion in unmet needs over 10 years. Do the math; \$20 billion will fix less than one-fifth of the problem.

That's all the more reason to spend it where it will do the most good.

If the commission staff prevails, the only Santa Clara County project recommended for first-year funding would be widening Highway 101 between Interstate 280 and Capitol Expressway. The second-most-congested highway in the Bay Area is Interstate 580 in the East Bay, and it would get only \$60 million of the \$200 million needed for carpool lanes.

When a new tax or bond measure is passed, there's a tendency to want to give something to everyone who voted for it. But this bond was sold as congestion relief for the worst trouble spots. It was strongly supported by business leaders in the Bay Area and was supported 2-1 by Bay Area voters. Anytime business begs for higher taxes, voters take note.

Passing out money the way the staff suggests is like sprinkling a few gallons of water over a parched garden. Nothing will thrive.

Bay Area representatives need to join Núñez and Perata in demanding strategic investment that will make voters proud of what they've accomplished, not embittered when the next tax measure comes along.

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