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Rural counties stake their claim to highway funds

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 E-mail article

California's rural counties, hoping against hope, finally may be able to get a piece of voter-approved bond funds. But first they'll have to merge into heavy political traffic from the Bay Area and Southern California, who are mounting a full-blown push for money.

"The whole transportation system is fraught with inequality," said Paul Smith of the Regional Council of Rural Counties. "Quite frankly, we've been suffering the longest."

After the California Transportation Commission unveiled its long-awaited list of recommendations, emissaries from the state's largest cities converged on Sacramento to fight for their share of \$4.5 billion in voter-approved traffic-relief money.

The CTC staff initially recommended only \$2.8 billion for 43 of 149 project nominations as the first of two planned disbursements. About three-fourths of the recommended projects relieve congestion, with one-quarter going to rural and suburban counties to improve their connectivity to the state's highway system. Decisions on spending the rest of the money are expected within a year.

Celia McAdam, executive director of the Placer County Transportation Planning Agency and a member of the CTC's rural task force, said that rural folks were happy to get any relief at all for their road system. "We were hoping for an opportunity like this," said McAdam.

But transportation officials from the Bay Area and Southern California, aided by the Capitol's top political leadership, believe the CTC missed the voters' intent in authorizing emergency bond monies to relieve the state's worst bottlenecks.

"Some of our roads move as fast as Jet Blue runways," said Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez, who threatens to block funding if the CTC doesn't change course to include more urban projects.

Last week, CTC executive director John Barna said the guidelines emphasized early delivery, connectivity, safety and geographical balance over straight traffic relief. At a phone-in news conference on heels of his staff recommendations, Barna said that "from our perspective, a massive congestion problem in the Bay Area is no more important than on Highway 49 in Nevada

massive congestion problem in the Bay Area is no more important than on highway 15 in Nevada City. We're trying to provide relief throughout the state."

Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa came to Sacramento Tuesday to admonish CTC staff for leaving off their list a \$1 billion project to widen the 405 freeway over the Sepulveda Pass. "This isn't just about L.A., it is about fair share," said Villaraigosa.

Senator Pro Tem Don Perata and Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger also weighed in on the side of big cities on Tuesday, sending dual letters to CTC Chairwoman Marian Bergeson that were critical of her staff's recommendations.

Perata's letter called for less connectivity projects in lieu of urban traffic-congestion relief, while Schwarzenegger called for the CTC to spend all \$4.5 billion as soon as possible, and spelled out specific urban projects to be included in the list.

Transportation commissioners are set to meet in Irvine next week to complete the first round of bond funding by March 1, as required by Proposition 1B, which was approved in November. If the CTC does radically amend their list of approved CMIA projects, rural counties are worried they'll see roadblocks.

"I hope none of the testimony will tear down the projects that are already recommended, because they are good projects," McAdam said, adding that rural counties can wait a lifetime to come up with funding. "We don't have the resources do the big projects ourselves," she added.

If there is one rural project that's been a long time coming, it's the Willits Bypass, a \$356 million project that was conceived in 1957, said Phil Dow, executive director of the Mendocino Council of Governments. Dow said that in the past 30 years they have raised over half of the money needed to fix the bottleneck, and are waiting for the \$177 million in CMIA funds to finish the job. In contrast to most regional transportation delegates at Tuesday's hearing, Dow's advice to CTC commissioners was "please listen to your staff. They did a great job."

Rural transportation authorities argue that their projects should get their due since they have completed their environmental impact reports--and otherwise lined their ducks in the row--to qualify for the money. With the exception of Willits Bypass, rural advocates say that most connectivity projects cost a tiny fraction of the state's overall \$20 billion bond.

"These are very small but important projects that are designed to make the entire system work," said Smith. While he said he was disappointed that more rural projects weren't recommended for funding, he cautioned commissioners not to revisit their recommendations on the basis of inequality claims from the big boys.

"Our expectations were low to begin with," he added.