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### State panel reconsidering road projects Under strong political pressure, officials to issue new proposal; fate of Hwy. 101 work unclear

By [Bob Norberg](#)  
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

California transportation officials are reconsidering how to spend \$4.5 billion in bond money amid withering criticism that they weren't addressing the most serious highway congestion problems.

A new list should be out by Monday, supplanting one that includes \$141 million for Highway 101 in Sonoma County, officials said Wednesday. The new recommendations won't include spreading the funding decisions over two years and could drop rural projects, such as the Willits bypass in Mendocino County, in favor of work in the Bay Area.

"We will re-evaluate certain projects, and they have asked us to come in with all \$4.5 billion and not in stages," said David Brewer, chief deputy director of the state Transportation Commission, referring to instructions issued Tuesday by commissioners.

The commission's staff had recommended spending \$2.8 billion on ready-to-build projects that would address congestion relief and safety problems and then spending \$1.7 billion more next year.

The money comes from Proposition 1B, a \$20 billion bond act approved by voters in November.

The commission's current list includes \$141 million to widen Highway 101 from Santa Rosa to Windsor and from Rohnert Park to Cotati, \$177 million for the Willits bypass and \$74 million to widen Highway 12 through Jameson Canyon in Solano County.

Put off until next year for consideration would be \$180 million for the Novato Narrows south of Petaluma.

Sonoma County officials were optimistic that funding for Highway 101 will remain on the list, but regional planners said it isn't guaranteed.

"We frankly don't know what projects are going to get funded," said Randy Rentschler, a Metropolitan Transportation Commission spokesman.

"The things about Sonoma County projects are they are ready to go, they relieve congestion and they are on the list," he said. "The commission could have narrowed down the discussion, 'We like these projects, let's take them off the table.' They didn't get to that."

Brewer said some projects could drop off the list to fund projects that were passed over. Although he wasn't specific, he did say commissioners were concerned about projects in rural areas.

During a public hearing Tuesday, critics said voters expected the commission to allocate funds toward solving the worst congestion in urban areas.

"This was supposed to go to the most congested areas," said Jim Wunderman, executive director of the Bay Area Council, a group of large employers.

Wunderman cited the Willits bypass, which he said "breaks faith with the voters." He was not the only one to single it out as an example of projects that shouldn't get the money.

"There are some rural projects being funded over some very congested urban projects," said Assemblywoman Noreen Evans, D-Santa Rosa.

"Compared to Cordelia junction, which has ongoing congestion problems every day, that corridor would be more urgent for funding than Willits."

Cordelia junction is where Interstates 80 and 680 converge in Solano County.

Marin County officials complained that \$180 million for the Novato Narrows was put over for a year and that a \$20-million auxiliary lane project at Highway 101 and I-580 was not funded at all.

"We will do our darndest to make sure that there is a fair representation for San Francisco, Marin and Sonoma counties," said state Sen. Carole Migden, D-San Francisco. "San Francisco lost Doyle Drive, and we are trying to recover the Novato Narrows."

The commission is scheduled to make a final funding decision Wednesday in Irvine.

Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez, D-Los Angeles, threatened to block the funding if the recommendations are not reconsidered.

"It appears the CTC recommendations are out of sync with the recommendations made by our local transportation partners," Núñez wrote to Commission Chairwoman Marian Bergeson.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger also sent a letter, complaining that key projects were omitted, including the Novato Narrows, Doyle Drive and I-580 projects in Alameda County.

Assemblywoman Patty Berg, D-Eureka, defended the Willits project as being overdue.

"It has been in the planning stages for 50 years, the county has put \$30 million into it, it is time to get it done," Berg said. "There is other money to take care of the Bay Area and Southern California."

The only restrictions on spending the \$4.5 billion in bond money were that it address congestion problems, that the projects be ready to be built and the money be split 60-40 between Southern and Northern California.

Regional transportation agencies around the state nominated 147 projects costing \$11.3 billion, while Caltrans submitted a list of \$6.4 billion in projects.

The commission staff recommended spending \$2.8 billion this year and having a second round of funding next year for the remaining \$1.7 billion, plus \$800,000 in regular state transportation funding.

The projects deferred until 2008 for consideration were those which the commission staff said did not meet the criteria of being ready for construction.

That list includes \$180 million for the Novato Narrows, \$150 million for Cordelia junction and \$730 million for car-pool lanes on I-405 in Los Angeles.

Through it all, Sonoma County officials remain optimistic.

"Bottom line, I think we are OK, but you never know for sure until the check is in the mail," said Bob Jehn, a Cloverdale councilman and county Transportation Authority member. Still, "you have \$11 billion trying to squeeze into a size 2 shoe."

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