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State road project choices rile officials

Transportation panel's staff recommendations 'shortchange' Bay Area

By Erik N. Nelson
MEDIANEWS

SACRAMENTO - The California Transportation Commission faced a tidal wave of opposition Tuesday as state officials from the governor on down expressed dismay with the first highway projects picked by commission staff to benefit from the \$20 billion transportation bond voters approved in November.

The initial \$2.8 billion worth of projects included more than \$500 million for rural highway upgrades in Northern California that Bay Area officials feared would crowd out Bay Area projects -- ones that would cut thousands of hours of delay from area freeways.

Commission staff on Friday recommended \$700 million for the Bay Area, less than half what the state's transportation agency, Caltrans, recommended. Staff members also rejected or deferred funding such projects along chronically backed-up interstates 80, 580 and 880 as well as U.S. Highway 101 from Gilroy to Santa Rosa.

"The Bay Area has significant transportation needs -- the Doyle Drive approach to the Golden Gate Bridge, the Marin-Sonoma Narrows on Highway 101 and the Alameda 580 corridor is a major goods-movement route that suffers from major congestion," wrote Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in a letter to the commission, which he appointed.

That was one sample from a laundry list of projects up and down the state that Schwarzenegger called "significant projects omitted from the CTC staff's list of projects recommended for funding that I believe should be reconsidered" as part of the entire \$4.5 billion Corridor Mobility Improvement Account within the transportation bond.

Similar complaints were lodged by the two top legislative leaders, with Assembly Speaker Fabian Nunez, D-Los Angeles, holding a news conference with Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa to call for funding for urban areas that reflects the population and congestion those areas suffer.

Two hours later, Villaraigosa and dozens of Southern California leaders clogged the auditorium where state transportation commissioners heard testimony on the highway bond projects. Even U.S. Rep. Brad Sherman, D-Sherman Oaks, showed up to testify that federal highway money would be lost if the commissioners followed their staff's recommendation against putting \$730 million into a new carpool lane on I-405 -- one of the nation's most congested freeways.

Those interests converged with those of the Bay Area, leaders from both areas agreed. The problem was not that one area was favored over another, rather that tidier project submissions, ones that showed a quick construction timetable, earned favor with commission staff.

Another issue is the bond's ambitious timetable for approval, which gives the CTC until March 1 to approve a list of projects. The commission is scheduled to vote on a list Feb. 28, but if it follows its staff's advice, it will hold some of the \$4.5 billion for another round of funding in 2008.

The commission's executive director, John Barna, even rated regions' submissions with letter grades, and complained that overall, California got a "C" for its submissions, "only because some regions lifted that grade up." Some were so bad, he said, "we had difficulty distinguishing what was being proposed."

Orange County officials, for example, expressed pleasure that several of their projects were recommended, while transportation officials from Monterey and San Luis Obispo counties urged commissioners to weed out projects that -- unlike their recommended projects -- had not received approval of environmental impact statements.

But most at the hearing, including a sizable Bay Area contingent, said that although the bond measure's goal of getting projects done quickly is laudable, it should not stand in the way of funding projects capable of relieving huge amounts of congestion.

"I must say that I find common cause with my colleagues in Southern California," said Alameda County Supervisor Scott Haggerty, who represents his county on the Bay Area's Metropolitan Transportation Commission, "and find it alarming that major congested corridors of I-580 and I-80/I-680 -- two corridors that also connect the growing Sacramento and Central valleys to the Bay Area, have either been shortchanged completely or ignored while the Willits Bypass is recommended to receive \$175 million, getting the third highest total in all of California."

The Willits Bypass, halfway from San Francisco to Eureka in Mendocino County, has become a symbol for Bay Area leaders because it would relieve a tiny fraction of the congestion that many Bay Area projects would for that amount of money. CTC staff have said such

projects meet the bond measure's requirement of improving "connectivity" between rural and urban areas.

But that explanation provides no relief for thousands of motorists who slog past Gilroy on U.S. 101 and crawl up I-880 toward the East Bay every morning, argued Carolyn Gonot, chief development officer for the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority.

"Every document we could find about the bond talked about congestion," testified Jim Wunderman, president of the Bay Area Council of major business executives. "This was no secret," he said of meetings with state officials -- including with the state transportation commission staff -- that preceded the Nov. 7 ballot, "this was always supposed to be about congestion."

Contact Erik Nelson at enelson@angnewspapers.com or 510-208-6410. Read his Capricious Commuter blog at InsideBayArea.com.

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