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Transportation officials' put finger on I-580 woes

Bottleneck strikes just as officials gather to update news media

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Inside Bay Area

Article Last Updated:03/10/2007 02:43:49 AM PST

LIVERMORE — Transportation officials' carefully organized media event Friday to celebrate progress in highway construction turned into a live demonstration of just how unhappy life is for commuters on Interstate 580.

Caltrans Director Will Kempton, California Transportation James Ghielmetti and Alameda County Supervisor Scott Haggerty were to update the media at 2 p.m. under an awning set up next to the eastbound lanes of the interstate, a short

distance east of the El Charro Road interchange.

Haggerty, however, didn't get there until close to 3 p.m., after leaving Oakland at 1:45, thanks to the very traffic bottleneck that was to frame the event.

"There is no reason that any taxpaying citizen should have to go through this traffic," Haggerty said to a reporter who had made the same enervating journey with similar results. "Just getting from the 580-680 interchange to here has totally drained me for the rest of the evening."

Haggerty said he could not blame passing motorists, who saw the assembly of transportation officials, for flipping them "the one-fingered salute."

The Friday traffic crunch, which Haggerty described as common, served as a powerful, if painful, reminder of how badly the Bay Area needs the \$1.29 billion in highway money from the \$20 billion Proposition 1B transportation bond approved Feb. 28 by Ghielmetti and his fellow commissioners.

"You're going to see some very quick improvements under this program," Kempton said as Caltrans workers began taking down the awning.

A combination of \$200 million in local and regional funds and \$240 million from the bond's Corridor Mobility Improvement Account should go a long way to unclog the type of bottleneck officials witnessed Friday, said Dennis Fay, executive director of the Alameda County Congestion Management Agency.

The money will pay for three projects, one of which is expected to begin construction in February, Kempton said. That project is the eastbound car pool lane from Foothill Road in Dublin to Greenville Road in Livermore, the first bond-funded highway construction in the Bay Area.

The traffic-choked Livermore Valley freeway will also get westbound car pool lanes and a brand-new interchange at Isabel Avenue that officials hope will help pull more Silicon Valley-bound traffic from the interstate onto State Route 84.

The Isabel Interchange project, along with car

pool lanes in Interstate 80 in Fairfield, are also bond-funded projects starting construction in the next year, Kempton said. When state legislative leaders and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger agreed on the bond measure, they included a requirement that highway projects be expedited, starting construction no later than 2011.

"What the bond funding does is it makes projects that we were already working on a reality," Fay said.

Haggerty admitted that it wasn't just the traffic that made him late to the event, but it was all about I-580.

He departed late from a meeting of the Alameda County Transportation Improvement Authority, which allocates money from the county's half-cent transportation sales tax.

"We voted for \$11 million to pay for right of way," Haggerty explained, that will some day make room for a special lane in which commuters pay a toll to scoot by traffic.

"The good news," he added as cars, SUVs and 18-wheelers plodded past, "is that we're here, we're doing something."

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