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Your agency will get its share of highway money

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This is a sampling of transportation writer Erik N. Nelson's Capricious Commuter blog on getting about the Bay Area. Read more and post comments at InsideBayArea.com.

After hibernating much of Thursday, I can now think more clearly about what happened Wednesday, and what didn't.

One thing I have an oddly unjournalistic sense of guilt over is how easily I ignored the flood of press releases that came out after the California Transportation Commission banged the gavel on \$4.5 billion worth of Proposition 1B highway money.

Whenever government gives birth to anything that a lot of people like, proud parents come popping out of the woodwork waving cigars.

I know a lot of readers aren't all that impressed with so much money going into pavement, but face it, people in this country, this state, this Bay Area — they drive to work, for the most part. The good news is that at some point, your neighborhood transit agency will be getting its share of a \$3.6 billion public transportation bond, plus more money for security upgrades.

The aftermath of the Corridor Mobility Improvement Account allocation was something like the podium at the Oscars, except much of the acceptance releases were self-congratulatory: "Most of all, I'd like to thank myself for all of my hard work that brought home the bacon to my county and my district."

OK, so nobody really said that, and it's not fair of me to, either, because, in the Bay Area in particular, there was a lot of well-deserved credit to take.

In a nutshell: We kicked a—up and down the state. The Bay Area was staring down \$700 million and ended up with \$1.29 billion. That's more than Los Angeles County's 10 million inhabitants got.

It didn't hurt that Bay Area officials, with a little help from the media, managed to vilify a certain bypass project in Mendocino County the commission's staff had recommended for \$177 million. The commission killed that idea, and put that money into a carpool lane on Interstate 580 from Livermore to Dublin and a project to open up the Novato Narrows.

Those projects were left off a list by the commission's staff after hearing outrage from Los Angeles, the Bay Area and San Diego over projects left off their first list. That last bit could be interpreted as a maneuver to allow the unfunded to rant about which projects they must have and then spend the entire wad to make everyone happy.

The other theory is that the CTC staff simply miscalculated how wrong they could be, politically speaking. When it was clear that somebody had to come up with a plan, there was one agency that had a bigger staff with more expertise and information at their fingertips that CTC members could turn to: the Metropolitan Transportation Commission.

That agency is the butt of many jokes for being a massive, bloated bureaucracy, and I may have make a few wisecracks about the sheer number of spokespeople who work there (they've got nothing on Caltrans, however), but those resources seemed to have paid off at this critical moment in history.

It probably didn't hurt that the Senate President Pro Tempore, Don Perata, hails from Oakland. One project starting in Oakland, a southbound carpool lane on I-80 from Hegenburger Road to Marina Boulevard in San Leandro, was left off the initial CTC staff list. While he didn't make a public fuss as did his Assembly counterpart, Fabian Nunez, he was no doubt working things out in his own quiet way.

Perata's was one of the releases I received Wednesday, and in retrospect, I have to appreciate its simplicity — a mere two paragraphs, calling it "a victory for commuters throughout the state," on the biggest infusion of highway money since the 1960s:

I also got a somewhat longer release from the Alameda County Congestion Management Agency, which, along with the Alameda County Transportation Improvement Authority, had been plugging away on several of these projects for years before Sacramento got its act together and passed the Mother of All Bonds.

In this case, it's probably not a stretch to say, as executive director Dennis Fay did in the release, that the win in Irvine was "a great effort by our elected officials, business organizations and community leaders."

There were others, some from involved parties and some from people who showed up at the appropriate moments, but all those voices added to

the pressure that brought legislative leaders, the governor and finally, the commissioners into the Bay Area's court.

Now give it five or 10 years, and you might see some actual projects get done.