

Battle for highway funds paid off

Applying pressure: Heavy politicking and strategic planning got the Bay Area most of what it needed to relieve congestion

Michael Cabanatuan, Greg Lucas, Chronicle Staff Writers

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When California voters passed Proposition 1B in November, they set off a scramble by cities, counties and transportation agencies to grab as much of the \$20 billion in bond revenues as they could.

The scramble continued until early Wednesday afternoon, when the California Transportation Commission handed out \$4.5 billion for highway projects in the first big bond revenue payout.

The Bay Area captured most of what it wanted thanks to aggressive lobbying that secured nearly \$2 billion for projects like widening the Novato Narrows, building carpool lanes on Interstates 80 and 580 and Highway 101 and a fourth bore for the Caldecott Tunnel.

The fight for funds began well before Wednesday, as commission staffers hunkered down at Caltrans headquarters a month ago to sort through \$11.3 billion in proposed projects.

Their job: Winnow the projects down to \$4.5 billion -- \$1.8 billion for Northern California and \$2.7 billion for Southern California.

"They had 30 days," said commission Vice Chairman Jim Ghielmetti. "It was really difficult for staff to go through all those, compare them and come up with a list."

While the state's population, number of registered vehicles and volume of traffic soared during the past two decades, transportation funding stagnated, leaving all 58 counties with long lists of projects they wanted to build.

"My ear's still warm from talking to all of you," Ghielmetti said Wednesday to the 250 transportation officials, politicians, lobbyists and others assembled for the meeting in Irvine.

Less than two weeks earlier, on Feb. 16, the commission's staff had recommended handing out \$2.7 billion this year and waiting until 2008 to hand out the rest after getting more information to compare projects.

The problem, commissioners and transportation officials said, is the recommendations omitted some of the biggest projects in the Bay Area and Los Angeles.

They also proposed spending some of the money on rural highway projects such as the \$177 million Willits Bypass in Mendocino County, which infuriated officials in congested urban areas.

"With the initial list, the commission staff managed to infuriate leadership from the two most powerful regions of the state. One of those regions has the leader of the Senate and the other has the leader of the Assembly," said Jim Wunderman, executive director of the Bay Area Council, a business group that lobbied on behalf of regional projects. "By doing that, the commission (staff) created an environment which guaranteed what they proposed wasn't going to be what happened."

Calls from elected officials started almost as soon as the list was out, said Bay Area commissioners Ghielmetti and Jeremiah Hallisey.

"When that (initial funding list) hit the street, a lot of legislators were very upset," Ghielmetti said.

At a Feb. 20 public hearing, while county transportation officials pleaded with commissioners to fund their projects, the governor weighed in.

About an hour into the afternoon meeting, Hallisey received on his Blackberry an e-mail from Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger urging the commission to fund several high-profile projects -- including, in the Bay Area, a westbound carpool lane on I-580 through the Tri-Valley area and the Doyle Drive approach to the Golden Gate Bridge.

"He sent a letter to the commission in the middle of a meeting," Hallisey said. "That certainly had an impact."

Aaron McLearn, Schwarzenegger's press secretary, said the governor "saw the initial list, and like all other stakeholders, he thought it was important he should put out what he thought should be on the list. Obviously he's pleased."

After that, transportation officials said, the lobbying picked up.

"Virtually every Assembly member or senator in the Bay Area called, sent a letter or an e-mail or both," Hallisey said.

So did local authorities, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, business groups like the Bay Area Council and Silicon Valley Leadership Group and lobbyists for highway builders.

"MTC was calling me three times a day," Hallisey said.

Randy Rentschler, the commission's spokesman, said the agency had a strategy to present a single message from the region.

"We didn't want people from nine counties all calling, pushing their own projects," he said, "and we don't think the commissioners did either. Our pitch was to have a unified position centered around congestion relief and then centered around a number."

That number was \$1.5 billion -- 85 percent of the money available for Northern California.

"What we tried to do was put projects before them that would get them close to that number by picking and

choosing Bay Area projects," Rentschler said. "And it was very important to have some geographic diversity so that no county would get zero."

It worked.

The Bay Area received more than \$1.3 billion in funds for projects scattered around the region -- including the I-580 carpool lane, widening of the Novato Narrows and merging lanes at the interchange of I-580 and Highway 101 in San Rafael. Those projects were not on the initial list the Caltrans staff put together.

Still, it took hard work to secure \$405 million for Doyle Drive, Rentschler said.

With help from state Sen. Carole Migden, D-San Francisco, and Stuart Sunshine, chief of staff to San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission persuaded Caltrans Director Will Kempton, and then the commission, to commit the money from a separate Caltrans account.

That deal was completed the night before the meeting, sources said, and officials in Sacramento called those Bay Area officials at a pre-meeting cocktail reception to let them know.

The region didn't get everything. The most noticeable absence was rebuilding the Cordelia Junction interchange of Interstates 80 and 680 in Solano County. Still, few are complaining.

"When all is said and done, we did very well," Rentschler said. "We're very grateful."

Prop. 1B projects

The California Transportation Commission approved a list of Bay Area projects that will receive \$1.4 billion in funding from voter-approved bonds. Here are the projects that will be built with the money.

Hwy. 101

1 HOV lanes and ramp work from Windsor River Rd., Windsor, to Steele Ln., Santa Rosa

2 HOV lanes from Santa Rosa Ave., Sonoma County, to Wilfred Ave., Rohnert Park

3 HOV lanes from Rohnert Park Expy., Rohnert Park, to Railroad Ave., Sonoma County

4 Widen Novato Narrows from Petaluma River bridge, Petaluma, to Atherton Ave., Novato

5 Build merging lanes at I-580 in San Rafael

6 Build merging lanes from Marsh Rd., Menlo Park, to Embarcadero Rd., Palo Alto

7 Widening from I-280/I-680 to Yerba Buena Rd., San Jose.

8 Build merging lanes from Embarcadero Rd., Palo Alto, to Hwy. 85, Mountain View

I-80

9 HOV lanes from I-680/Hwy.12, Fairfield, to Putah South Canal, Vacaville

10 Freeway-local road work from Carquinez Bridge to Bay Bridge

I-580

11 Eastbound HOV lane from Hacienda Dr., Pleasanton, to Greenville Rd., Livermore

12 Westbound HOV lane from Foothill Rd., Dublin, to Greenville Rd., Livermore

13 Westbound HOV interchange lane at Hwy. 84

I-880

14 Southbound HOV lane from Hegenberger Rd., Oakland, to Marina Blvd., San Leandro

15 Southbound HOV lane between Hwys. 237 to 101

Hwy. 24

16 Caldecott Tunnel, fourth bore

Hwy. 12

17 Widen Jameson Canyon Rd. through American Canyon

Hwy. 4

18 Widen from Somersville Rd., Antioch, to Hwy. 160, Oakley

E-mail the writers at mcabanatuan@sfchronicle.com and glucas@sfchronicle.com.

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