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Rural roads nab biggest bond bucks

Bay Area officials irked that region will receive less money than desired

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Inside Bay Area

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Bay Area officials reacted with disappointment and anger to state planners' recommendation that \$500 million worth of transportation bonds pay for rural highway projects such as the Willits Bypass, leaving the Bay Area with less than half of what officials requested.

The staff of the California Transportation Commission on Friday released its project choices for the \$4.5 billion Corridor Mobility Improvement Account, the biggest program within the \$20 billion transportation bond state voters approved Nov. 7. The commission is scheduled to make the final choice on projects to be funded on Feb. 28 in Irvine.

Only \$707 million worth of Bay Area projects were on the staff-recommended list, less than half of the \$1.5 billion recommended by Caltrans and the \$2 billion requested by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, the Bay Area's transportation planning body.

"When you ask for over \$200 million for Interstate 580, and you only get \$60 million, and you fully fund projects like the Willits Bypass, there's a problem," said Alameda County Supervisor Scott Haggerty, who represents the county on the MTC.

The state commission staff list also set aside much of the highway money for a second round of funding in 2008. Friday's recommendations only included \$2.8 billion of the

\$4.5 billion total.

"Not to be greedy, but at least it should be proportionate," said Assemblyman Mark DeSaulnier, who until recently represented Contra Costa County on the MTC. DeSaulnier and other members of the Bay Area's delegation sent a letter to the state commission asking that it carefully consider the fact the Bay Area has more than 85 percent of Northern California's congestion and that it is an economic engine for the entire state.

The issue even made its way into the halls of Congress, with Rep. Ellen Tauscher,

D-Alamo, saying in a statement:

"It troubles me that a project as vital as improving I-80/I-680/Highway-12 (through Solano County) that will relieve congestion and connect our growing region was left off this list of staff recommendations, while other projects that made the list are very expensive and in areas with much less traffic congestion. It really just doesn't make sense to me."

Business leaders have spent the last month lobbying with local officials to drive home how much economic benefit would flow from fixing urban traffic bottlenecks, as opposed to rural projects that serve more to complete the state's highway network and provide far less benefit.

"What we were afraid of appears to be happening," said Jim Wunderman, president of the Bay Area Council of top business leaders. "The state agency is making a priority of rural projects that really don't address the congestion that has incredible economic impact on the state."

Now that lobbying effort will have to be redoubled, Haggerty said.

"I think we will certainly have our work cut out for us in the next two weeks," Haggerty said, adding that Bay Area officials already have made their case with some state commission members and there's hope that they might not be convinced by their staff's choices.

Even Los Angeles was feeling the sting at a phone-in press conference put on by the state commission's staff.

A Southern California reporter asked why the Los Angeles area would receive only about 11 percent of the money under the recommendations while it had 30 percent of the state's population.

"We've avoided falling into the trap of fair share based on population," said the state commission's executive director, John Barna. He argued that factors such as an imbalance between jobs in one area and housing in another could cause more congestion problems in less-populated areas.

There were some key Bay Area projects that did get the nod from the CTC staff, most conspicuously benefiting commuters traveling from or through Contra Costa County.