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'One Voice' members visit capitol to grease transportation funding wheels

By Chris Collins

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SACRAMENTO -- While politicians here wrangle, debate and haggle over how California should spend more than \$100 billion on transportation improvements, Merced County officials are trying to stay above the fray.

They just have a few tiny requests.

For starters, they'd like \$1 billion to expand Highway 99 from four lanes to six lanes. They also want a few million dollars to jump-start local projects like the 4.5-mile Campus Parkway just east of Merced and a bypass that will free up congestion in downtown Los Baños.

About two dozen government officials and business leaders from the county formed a group called the One Voice Delegation and spent all day Tuesday puddle-jumping around the state capital. They met with everyone from Caltrans Director Will Kempton to three of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's right-hand cabinet members.

There was a constant theme: Grease the wheels.

They hope that a little lobbying will bring a lot of funds to the county.

They also discovered how easily the fate of local projects are subject to the outcome of big-time decisions made in Sacramento.

Most importantly, for example, the future of Highway 99 may hang in the outcome of a volatile debate over how to spend a good chunk of the \$105 billion set aside for roads and transportation needs.

If the state puts \$1 billion toward the highway, it would be a significant step toward making the route a six-lane freeway from Stockton to Bakersfield by 2014. The entire project would cost \$6 billion.

Schwarzenegger wants Caltrans to have more direct control over allocating the transportation funds this year. Many in the Legislature balk at the idea and insist the money be spent on projects that they have already earmarked for repair and construction.

"Why do we start new lists when we haven't finished old projects?" Sen. Alan Downthal, D-L.A., asked Kempton at a hearing the One Voice group attended.

"It would dilute the effect of those dollars by putting them through the existing process," Kempton responded. But other than saying Caltrans would "propose a more definitive congestion reduction," he didn't clarify how his agency would have different criteria for where to funnel the transportation funds than the criteria already used by local officials.

The governor's proposal looks much more attractive to Merced County, said Jesse Brown, director of the Merced County Association of Governments. Though tentative at this point, that plan has \$1 billion set aside for Highway 99. The legislative proposal looks less promising.

To piece together a transportation puzzle like the one in the Valley, he said, "you need someone to look at the bigger picture."

He added, "If Merced County gets dollars under the typical formula, we won't have (six lanes for Highway 99) for 30 years. ... The governor's proposal gives some hope that there might be some way to fix that."

But Rusty Selix, director of the California Association of Councils of Governments, said it's unlikely Schwarzenegger's version of the transportation plan will pass untouched.

"I think there's a tremendous legislative sentiment to put a large portion of the funding in the hands of locals," he said.

Selix also warned that the governor's proposal may only be a mirage at this point.

"What the governor's proposing should not be viewed as what it's being advertised as," he said. "First of all, after this is passed, the governor may not be the governor anymore. A Democratic governor will not pay any attention to what the governor has set aside."

Kempton, the Caltrans director, said Schwarzenegger's plan is the county's best at this point, however.

"From your perspective, the package sounds pretty good," he said.

Other issues the One Voice group discussed included:

- Los Banos Councilman Mike McAdam said the hazardous spill last weekend that shut down parts of Highway 152 and Interstate 5 was "just horrendous." He said it highlighted the need for improvements on the highway that connects the Valley with the coast.

A good place to start is a bypass around his city, he said.

"It's a regional problem," McAdam said. "It's something we started talking about in the '60s and still hasn't happened."

- A recently passed and union-backed state law requires any project that uses public funds to pay construction workers a "prevailing wage." Merced City Manager Jim Marshall said that translates to cost increases of up to 55 percent.

Victoria Bradshaw, secretary of labor and workforce development, said she could sympathize.

"If you look at what you're paying downtown San Francisco, it could be what you're paying in downtown Merced," she said. "We're trying to get unions to give different rates for different places."

Merced Councilman Bill Spriggs called the rules "maddening" and said the city has lost many projects and improvements because of the law.

Bradshaw said the state law is too politically entrenched to be removed, but there might be a way to lessen the effects on specific construction projects like low-income and migrant worker housing.

- Scott Galbraith, president of the Merced County Economic Development Organization, asked for \$375,000 for a two-year program that would help locals start up their own small business. The cabinet members listened carefully but the One Voice group got only a nod from the department heads before moving on to the next subject.

- The county officials also warned the cabinet members that the water levels in the Valley have been gradually decreasing over the years.

- County Superintendent of Education Lee Andersen predicted that the county will need almost 40 schools built in the next decade because of massive growth. The money coming from the state isn't enough, he said, especially with rising construction costs.

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