

# 'One Voice' delegation solicits lawmakers for additional Highway 99 improvement funds

By Chris Collins

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Local officials' quest for \$1 billion to jump-start an expansion of Highway 99 throughout the Valley is trudging along, but they have plenty of hurdles to leap over.

A group of Merced County representatives and business leaders, known as the "One Voice" delegation, spent four days in Washington, D.C., chatting with policy-makers last month to help fulfill their transportation dreams.

They shook lots of hands. They even heard a few solid commitments.

With some luck and a little lobbying, they hope the conversations will help turn Highway 99 into a six-lane freeway from Stockton to Bakersfield by 2014.

Eventually, the entire project will cost \$6 billion.

On the home front, the state Legislature is mulling over at least two different bills that could lead to \$1 billion for the highway.

Cathleen Galgiani, chief of staff for Assemblywoman Barbara Matthews, D-Tracy, said Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and leaders of both the Assembly and Senate are committed to setting aside \$1 billion for the highway in a transportation bond that will likely go before voters in November.

"We were fighting like crazy for this," Galgiani said.

But nothing is set in stone, and any number of special interest groups could steer

money away from the highway project.

Richard Stapler, a spokesman for Assembly speaker Fabian Nunez, (D-Los Angeles), said Matthews and other local officials "have all been lobbying the speaker heavily on this issue." He said Nunez is committed to allocating \$1 billion for the highway.

Nunez and U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) met with the county's One Voice group in Washington, D.C., in late March. County officials told them that their No. 1 priority was to expand Highway 99, said Terrance Grindall, a vice president for developer Ranchwood Homes.

"They appreciated us having a unified voice," said Grindall, who was part of the county group. "We talked about something that had statewide implications."

The One Voice delegation is taking a two-pronged approach to expanding the highway. First, it's asking Nunez and state officials for the \$1 billion to fund the actual project. Second, it's seeking \$4 million from the federal government for a study of the expansion, a necessary prerequisite for the project to go through.

The officials were lobbying Feinstein for the second part of the plan.

They asked her to try to slip funding for the study into an appropriations bill that is scheduled to be approved by the end of the year.

Gustine City Councilman

Joe Oliveira, who was part of the group, said that at the meeting, Feinstein told her legislative assistant to make the study a priority.

"Nothing's come of it, but we left that meeting with good feelings," Oliveira said.

Steve Madison, who is the director of the Building Industry Association of Central California and was part of the county group, called the meeting "a huge event for the One Voice delegation."

A spokesman for Feinstein gave a version of the exchange that made it sound like the senator had a more tentative approach to the proposal. He said the senator told county officials that "she'd see what she can do to help."

He added, "It's fair to say that she'll seek to get it in the bill."

The One Voice group also asked Feinstein and U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., as well as other federal elected and appointed officials, to help them with their other two priorities: \$5 million for a study that will help the county handle its decreasing groundwater levels and \$375,000 for a program that would give loans to small businesses.

Those two proposals didn't seem to gain as much traction, One Voice delegates said.

"Everybody thought it was a good idea, but it didn't get a commitment," Oliveira said of the loans program.

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