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Valley leaders lobby for federal funds

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WASHINGTON — San Joaquin Valley officials have brought a billion-dollar wish list to Capitol Hill this week, though they know they'll be lucky to get a fraction of what they're asking for.

Representing eight valley counties, officials want money for upgrading Highway 99. They want high-speed rail funding. They'd like help with cleaning the region's air. Housing assistance would be nice, too.

"It doesn't hurt to let them know early and often what you want," Jesse Brown, executive director of the Merced County Association of Governments, explained Wednesday.

Brown is one of about 20 representatives of the San Joaquin Valley Regional Policy Council pressing for federal dollars this week.

It's the latest chapter in regional lobbying, though it involves some tried and true techniques.

Individual valley counties sent delegations to Washington earlier this year. Often operating under the name "One Voice," or something similar, the county delegations sought congressional support for their respective priorities.

Now in its second year, the San Joaquin Valley Regional Policy Council's Washington lobbying trip extends this idea to the broader region between Stockton and Bakersfield. The mayors, county supervisors, county executives and planners refer to their venture as the "Valley Voice" effort.

"The only projects we talk about are the ones we can agree on," Stanislaus County Supervisor Jeff Grover said. "If we can't agree on it, we don't talk about it."

Advocacy for asphalt

Highway 99 is Numero Uno. In briefings conducted in a fifth-floor House office Wednesday, and over dinner held Wednesday night at the popular Johnny's Half Shell restaurant, the valley officials made their case for \$1 billion worth of specific Highway 99 work.

This includes, for instance, spending \$205 million to widen the highway to six lanes between Prosperity and Goshen in Tulare County and \$73 million for widening it to eight lanes from northern Modesto to the San Joaquin County line.

The goal is to get as many of the specific Highway 99 projects as possible folded into a transportation authorization bill.

These bills are supposed to be passed every few years, though deadlines sometimes slip.

"I'm just not sure we're going to have a transportation bill this year," cautioned Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Visalia.

Nunes' morning presentation was followed by an appearance by Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, as the delegation tried touching all of the regional bases.

The valley delegation is also going off-road, pressing for federal help with a proposed short-haul railroad designed to take farm goods to the Port of Oakland. Officials want the federal government to pick up half of the cost of a proposed high-speed rail system for which California voters already have approved \$9.9 billion.

Legislatively, the valley officials want the region designated as a new "air quality empowerment zone" that potentially would free up federal grant funding.

"We know that money is tight, and it's going to be a battle," acknowledged Madera Mayor Pro Tempore Robert Poythress, "but if we weren't here as a coalition voicing the importance of these projects, we would be further behind the eight ball."

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