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Merced County leaders press for project funding on annual Washington trip

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WASHINGTON -- Hope springs eternal for the Merced County residents who this week are pressing Congress for projects including the long- delayed Los Banos Bypass.

In an annual lobbying ritual, some two dozen officials and staffers from throughout Merced County are making the Capitol Hill rounds. They're asking for more than \$54 million in local assistance, even as they confront tighter federal purse strings.

"The political climate is different," Mark J. Hendrickson, head of the county's Commerce, Aviation and Economic Development Department, acknowledged Wednesday. "Obviously, resources are finite."

Hendrickson is a veteran of "One Voice" lobbying trips, so called because county officials unite behind a common set of priorities and try to avoid freelancing.

Merced's enumerated priorities, for instance, include \$9 million for the first segment of the Los Banos Bypass, \$33 million for continuation of a parkway serving UC Merced and \$3 million to upgrade sewage treatment in the impoverished community of Planada.

Some of the proposed funding potentially would come through legislation. Some funding, such as for the Planada Community Services District, would come through a potential federal grant.

"Having the feds assist us in any form would be a big help," said Merced County Supervisor John Pedrozo, whose district includes Planada.

One of Merced's priorities is relatively generic: offering overall support for California's proposed high-speed rail system.

Another -- the Los Banos Bypass -- has been talked about for several decades.

Environmental studies are under way for the proposed bypass, which would route Highway 152 around the city of 35,000 residents. Construction estimates have ranged upward of half a billion dollars, for a project born during the 1960s.

"We're looking at the same objective as in years past," Los Banos Mayor Mike Villalta said Wednesday. "It's unlikely we'll get an earmark ... but it really needs to stay in the pipeline."

In 2009, a federal database shows, Rep. Dennis Cardoza, D-Merced, sponsored a \$950,000 earmark targeting the Los Banos Bypass.

Now, prompted by Republicans, the House and Senate have sworn off earmarked appropriations, severely diminishing the ability of individual lawmakers to steer funding toward specific local projects.

"We don't have as much of an opportunity to effectuate the budget process, because of the earmark ban," Cardoza cautioned.

Nonetheless, occasionally breaking into smaller groups to focus on specific topics such as education and transportation, the Merced delegation members on Tuesday and Wednesday huddled with an assortment of lawmakers, congressional staffers and Obama administration officials.

Other San Joaquin Valley counties likewise employ variations on the "One Voice" theme and will be conducting lobbying trips in coming weeks.

The Merced County Association of Governments organized this year's effort with the help of Van Skoyoc Associates, a Washington-based lobbying firm that is paid \$50,000 a year by the Merced group. Separately, the city and county of Merced pay their own D.C. lobbying firms, as well.