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L.A. wants piece of the pie

County agencies set to seek share of \$43 billion in statewide bonds

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SACRAMENTO - With voter approval of \$43 billion in statewide bonds last week, Los Angeles County officials are preparing to seek a massive cash infusion that could mean multibillion-dollar construction projects to relieve overcrowded highways and schools.

While there is no comprehensive list of projects to be funded, Los Angeles Unified School District alone expects to seek more than \$1 billion for its new construction and modernization program.

Transit officials said they will seek assistance for billions of dollars in projects to relieve congestion and improve public transportation and air quality. And hundreds of millions of dollars more are expected to flood into local housing and water quality needs, according to an informal survey by the Daily News.

The county, however, will face fierce competition from hundreds of municipalities across the state and some critics are concerned that the money will be doled out based on political muscle rather than need.

"I'm not convinced the money will be spent wisely," said George Passantino, a senior fellow at the Reason Foundation. "Many of the descriptions provided on how the money would be spent are vague and subject to legislative interpretation, which smells to me of a shopping spree.

"These folks are going to be lining up to get their piece of the pie, and I'm not convinced those decisions will be made based upon what's best for the state."

State officials said that in most cases, agencies will be following long-established, merit-based procedures to allocate the new funds. And most - including the California Transportation Commission and the State Allocation Board - already have standing commissions that meet publicly to approve expenditures.

"We will have a great deal of oversight to make sure the bonds are spent in a manner consistent with what the voters approved," said H.D. Palmer, spokesman for the state Department of Finance.

Palmer noted that each of the bond measures also established new committees to make sure the new funds are spent carefully, even as state agencies use varying methods for distributing funds.

Other bond funds must conform to new regulations that will be drafted in the next few months, and in some cases projects may need a green light from the Legislature and the governor.

But already, Southern California agencies have accelerated plans to push for a piece of the \$19.9 billion in transportation bonds, \$2.85 billion in housing bonds, \$10.4 billion for school construction, \$4.1 billion for flood prevention and \$5.4 billion for water quality and flood control.

Mark Pisano, executive director of the Southern California Association of Governments, said the region has roughly \$98 billion in transportation needs alone, and is about \$65 billion short of funding.

The new transportation bond might bring in another \$9 billion to help fund some of those needs, he said, and that money in turn can be used to leverage other funding sources such as the federal government and the private sector.

"Our goal is to keep (traffic) from getting any worse," Pisano said.

Officials with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority have a list of priority projects they plan to submit for funding including the car-pool lane on the northbound 405 Freeway between the 10 and 101 freeways and a car-pool lane on the 5 Freeway between the 170 and 134 freeways.

For the housing bond, Los Angeles County officials said it is hard to determine how much the region might get. At a minimum, he said, the bond would help with \$30 million to \$40 million worth of affordable housing units, as well as shelters for battered women and housing for those with mental and substance abuse problems.

"Unless you have affordable housing that's accessible to people, they cannot live within a reasonable distance of their jobs," said Gregg Kawczynski, a manager in the Los Angeles County housing program. "It actually hurts the economy if you do not have housing for employees."

Bill Higgins, a senior staff attorney and housing expert for the California League of Cities, said the last big housing bond measure, Proposition 46, was distributed under several formulas including geography and individual projects.

At least 36,000 housing units were built with assistance from that bond, he said.

On the school bond, LAUSD officials expect to qualify for more than \$1 billion for the district's massive building program.

The district estimates they would qualify for \$475 million in new construction funds, including \$40 million for charter schools, \$10 million for career and technical education and \$340 million for overcrowding relief.

They also expect to get \$585 million to modernize existing facilities, including \$60 million for seismic safety repairs and \$20 million for removal of portable facilities.

"It will help us finish our job," said outgoing Superintendent Roy Romer.

The state distributes funding for school projects through the State Allocation Board, whose members include the state finance director, the director of the Department of General Services, the superintendent of public instruction, six state legislators and one appointee by the governor.

Chris DeLong, a policy manager with the Office of Public School Construction that staffs the SAB, said new construction funds are allocated on a first-come, first-served basis if they meet basic criteria.

"Districts have to demonstrate that they have unhoused people to get funds from the state," DeLong said. "Not just overcrowding, but that they don't have the seats necessary to house kids within the 5-year projections of enrollment."

Funds for modernization of existing school buildings are also provided on a first-come, first-served basis, provided they meet certain criteria, like a facility that is more than 25 years old. The state will provide up to 60 percent of funding for those projects.

On the new construction program, the state still has \$2.4 billion remaining from an earlier bond authorization, Proposition 55. But the program to modernize existing facilities has already run out of funding for approved projects.

The SAB has a list of \$221 million in approved modernization projects that will be first in line for the new funds. They include \$5.4 million for LAUSD, \$5.6 million for Burbank Unified, \$4.2 million for Whittier Union High and a total of \$40.5 million for all districts in Los Angeles County; \$33.4 million for various districts in San Bernardino County; and \$1.4 million for districts within Ventura County.

The two flood control bonds are expected to primarily help the Sacramento Delta and Central Valley regions. But the Los Angeles region gets a large portion of its water supply from the Delta, officials noted.

Tom Erb, a spokesman for the Los Angeles city Department of Water and Power, said the city will seek money for restoration of the Los Angeles River, integrated regional water management planning and for water recycling and conservation projects.

Another major project is the rehabilitation of Big Tujunga Dam, which would help capture rainwater and channel it to the groundwater supply.

"We've been anticipating that if these bonds pass, we'd definitely want to be involved and active to try and make sure the city and region gets our fair share, and we're working on these things right now," Erb said.

Staff Writer Rachel Uranga contributed to this report.

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