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State bond list stuns local officials

By: DAVE DOWNEY - Staff Writer

NORTH COUNTY ---- Offering a first glimpse at how state transportation bond money might be spent, the California Transportation Commission's staff on Friday recommended that the powerful panel award \$304 million for road projects in San Diego County and \$38 million for a project in Southwest Riverside County.

The recommended San Diego County projects include the proposed retrofit of the Interstate 15 express lanes in the Miramar area to match the expansion under way to the north, as well as car-pool lane extensions on Interstates 5 and 805.

The Southwest Riverside County project is the planned widening of Interstate 215 to six lanes between I-15 and Scott Road.

In both counties, transportation officials expressed alarm.

"I'm really disappointed," said Ron Roberts of Temecula, a Riverside County transportation commissioner and chairman of the Metrolink board of directors. "I thought we would do better than that. I can tell you, we were really hoping to get more. We are one of the fastest-growing counties in California, if not the fastest, and we are without adequate freeways."

Riverside County's recommended share is 1.4 percent of the proposed total award of \$2.8 billion. However, that does not include the \$71 million recommended for an Orange County project to build a Highway 91 eastbound lane between Highway 241 in Orange County and Highway 71 in Riverside County.

In San Diego County, officials weren't as concerned about share, as their region was in line to claim 11 percent of the statewide total while the population represents less than that. But officials said they were upset that the commission staff didn't recommend releasing more of the money upfront, saying that San Diego County was in excellent position to compete for remaining funds.

"Our concern is that they artificially constrained everything by cutting projects off at \$2.8 billion," said Gary Gallegos, executive director of the San Diego Association of Governments. "We don't understand that. The governor, the Legislature and the voters all said, 'Do this as fast as you can.'"

In all, the commission staff suggested awarding \$2.8 billion for 43 projects statewide out of the \$4.5 billion total that is expected to be made available from the bond for urban freeways, and waiting until next year to commit the balance of the funds.

The commission, a nine-member appointed body with one member from San Diego County and one from Riverside County, is scheduled to meet in Sacramento on Tuesday to hear comments on the recommendations from transportation officials. Then, on Feb. 28 in Irvine, the commission is expected to make a decision on whether to largely accept the recommendations or substantially alter them.

Executive Director John Barna said the staff decided not to recommend that all the money be awarded this month to make sure every project meets the requirement of being under construction by the end of 2012. He said a number of projects, including some in San Diego and Riverside counties, were rated high but weren't recommended for funding because their start dates were later than June 2011 and were considered at risk of not making the deadline.

"These are complex projects," Barna said. "Costs are likely to increase. Schedules are likely to slip."

When it came to dividing up the money around the state, the staff proposed awarding \$296 million to the Central Coast, \$193 million to rural Northern California, \$685 million to the San Francisco Bay Area, \$256 million to the Sacramento area, \$136 million to the San Joaquin Valley, \$304 million to the San Diego region and \$910 million to the rest of Southern California.

There were concerns about apparent inequities.

Gallegos noted that Orange County was recommended to receive nearly 100 percent of the money it requested, while San Diego County was recommended for 50 percent. And Eric Haley, executive director of the Riverside County Transportation Commission, said Northern California appeared to be in line for more than its share in this first cut of freeway money.

"This first round is wildly distorted in the direction of the North," Haley said.

State officials said they weren't aiming to deliver a perfectly balanced list.

"Frankly, we were looking at what were the best projects regardless of geography," said David Brewer, chief deputy director.

However, state officials acknowledged that ultimately, the bond measure, Proposition 1B that voters passed in November, requires that 60 percent of the money to be spent in Southern California.

Recommended for funding were:

- I-15 express lanes between Highways 56 and 163. Out of \$400 million requested by the region, \$200 million was recommended for funding.
- I-5 car-pool lanes from Via de la Valle to Manchester Avenue. Out of \$64 million requested, \$36 million was recommended.
- I-805 car-pool lanes from Carroll Canyon Road to I-5. Out of \$82 million requested, \$56 million was recommended.
- I-215 widening from I-15 to Scott Road. Out of \$62 million requested, \$38 million was recommended.

Not recommended for funding were projects to add more car-pool lanes on I-5 along the North County coast, north of Manchester, as well additional widening of I-215 north of Scott.

Haley said the big surprise in Riverside County was the recommendation not to fund a five-mile missing link in the car-pool system on Highway 91, to connect with the Interstate 215-Highways 60/91 interchange that is undergoing a giant makeover.

"That creates this gigantic bottleneck right there in downtown Riverside, which is probably the densest area in the western (Riverside) county," he said.

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