

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Adopted bills mean millions for O.C. transportation

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2013-09-13 12:23:58



California lawmakers adopted two transportation bills worth tens of millions of dollars to Orange County in the closing hours of the legislative session this week.

One survived union challenges and constitutional questions to land on the governor's desk. The other was drafted with help from the governor himself to keep the federal government from pinching off federal transit grants.

The Orange County Transportation Authority drafted the first of those bills to streamline the design and construction of additional lanes on I-405. It estimated in a letter to lawmakers that the bill would cut up to three years off of the 405 project, saving close to \$100 million.

But one clause in the bill drew protest from the American Council of Engineering Companies. The clause allowed only Caltrans inspectors to oversee the freeway work, not private engineering companies. A legislative analyst concluded that it violated a section of California's constitution that prohibits such a restriction.

The bill, carried by Assemblyman Tom Daly, D-Anaheim, passed after lawmakers rewrote it to allow Caltrans or its consultants to do the work. The engineering union still considers it potentially unconstitutional because it takes that decision away from Orange County and other local agencies and gives it to the state, said the group's executive director in California, Paul Meyer.

"We have not made any decisions" about whether to file suit, Meyer said.

For now, work on the 405 is scheduled to get underway in 2015. The project will add at least one new lane in each direction to 16 jammed miles of the freeway, at a total cost of more than \$1 billion. The new lanes are scheduled to open to traffic in 2020.

The 405 bill spent months fighting its way through legislative hearings and committee meetings. The second bill, which exempts thousands of California transit workers from the state's pension-reform law, zipped through the Legislature in about a week.

Gov. Jerry Brown and the federal Department of Labor had been locked in a stare-down for months over California reforms that put limits on the pensions that government agencies can offer new hires. The Labor Department had frozen transit grants to California, citing a provision of federal law that requires grant recipients to uphold the collective-bargaining rights of their workers.

That put nearly \$115 million in transit funds for Orange County on the shelf. The OCTA postponed its plans to replace nearly 200 buses because of the impasse, and its executives had started to talk about service cuts and project delays.

Instead, Brown and the Labor Department negotiated the bill to exempt transit workers from the pension requirements until January 2015. That gives the two sides some time to take their cases to court – without tying up the transit funds, if all goes as planned.

Brown has until Oct. 13 to sign or veto that law and the one that streamlines work on the 405.

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