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# Dan Walters: Finally, an opportunity to fix roads

**By Dan Walters - Bee Columnist**

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Jerry Brown will be sworn in as California's attorney general in January, precisely 32 years after being inaugurated for the first of his two terms as governor.

Brown's return to Sacramento has many ironic aspects, not the least being what else will be happening in January: The state Transportation Commission will begin allocating tens of billions of bond and tax dollars to reverse the shameful deterioration of California's once-superb highway system that began when Brown, more or less on a whim, virtually stopped construction. Brown declared an "era of limits," halted hundreds of long-planned projects and laid off thousands of state highway designers and builders.

California didn't stop growing, but succeeding governors made no appreciable progress in undoing what Brown wrought. The state has already added more than 14 million bodies to its population since Brown's inauguration in 1975, as well as more than 10 million additional cars and trucks, and they have relentlessly pounded California's undermaintained, overstressed state and local roadways.

California has the nation's worst traffic congestion and some of its worst pavement. We spend less per capita on highways than any other state in a weltering array of federal, state and local transportation planning and financing schemes that often work at cross-purposes. It's no wonder that the Transportation Commission declared in its annual report last year that California's transportation program "is in shambles" and "inherently unstable, unreliable, inflexible and inadequate."

Suddenly, however, there's some money. Voters have approved a measure that will require about \$2 billion a year in sales taxes on fuel to be spent on transportation, except under emergency conditions, and a \$19.9 billion bond issue sponsored by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Legislature.

It's merely a down payment on the \$100 billion-plus that's needed to bring highways and other transportation systems up to snuff, it adds even more complexity to an already obtuse system, and it's less satisfactory than stable, long-term financing, such as an increase in gas taxes. But it's a start.

California voters, by their strong votes, have signaled that they want something done about congestion, and transportation planners have an immense backlog of high-priority projects. It's an opportunity for the Transportation Commission, the Department of Transportation, the governor and the Legislature to deliver on their implicit promises to undo three decades of neglect. And they'd better not screw it up.

The worst thing those who allocate the new bucks could do would be to pork it up -- bowing to political or special-interest pressure to build projects that enhance someone's political standing or bank account rather than concentrating on the projects that motorists and travelers need the most. Unfortunately, there's some history to make that a legitimate concern.

Six years ago, when the state was very temporarily flush with cash, then-Gov. Gray Davis (who had been Brown's chief of staff) and the Legislature allocated \$4.9 billion for a so-called "congestion relief"

program that bypassed the long-standing prioritization process and dictated specific projects -- such as a freeway interchange to serve a casino owned by a politically influential Indian tribe. Little of the money was actually spent because the state grabbed it back to deal with its budget crisis, but the porcine intent was there.

If those in charge of spending the money do it right -- quickly and efficiently -- voters might be willing to opt for long-term financing later, but if they don't, it will have been a cruel joke and California's transportation crisis will continue.

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