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## **County looks to benefit from state bond measure**

### **Officials to seek \$600 million for area transportation needs**

By Charles Levin, [clevin@VenturaCountyStar.com](mailto:clevin@VenturaCountyStar.com)

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Approval earlier this week of Measure 1B, a massive statewide transportation bond, could free more than \$600 million in funds for local plans to widen freeways, improve rail crossings and launch a new freight and commuter rail line.

"We're delighted," Ginger Gherardi, executive director of the Ventura County Transportation Commission, said this week of the \$19.1 billion measure. "There's quite a bit of money in there for the people of this county. Hopefully, we will be able to obtain these funds."

Transportation officials must still compete for the dollars, but Gherardi seemed optimistic about the county's chances.

Topping the list of priorities is \$28 million for widening Highway 118 in Simi Valley from Tapo Canyon Road to the Los Angeles County line.

Officials also plan to request \$130 million to widen Highway 101 between Ventura and Santa Barbara. Hordes of middle-income workers have migrated from Santa Barbara to Oxnard and Ventura for cheaper housing.

The upshot has been rush-hour gridlock for motorists commuting to parts north for jobs. Most of that road — between Carpinteria and Santa Barbara — is two lanes in each direction.

That money also would pay for a pedestrian tunnel under Highway 101 by the beachside community of La Conchita, Gherardi said.

An additional \$350 million would go to the Santa Paula Branch Line, a proposed freight and commuter rail line connecting Port Hueneme with Santa Clarita.

Some \$30 million would go to help Oxnard complete its Rice Avenue interchange renovation at Highway 101. With the project's completion, the state may redesignate Highway 1 from Oxnard Boulevard to Rice Avenue, giving the city more authority to improve traffic and business along one of its main drags.

An additional \$110 million would be divvied up for several railroad grade crossings, improving safety and traffic flow. These include crossings at Highway 118 between Somis and Moorpark near Hitch Road (\$50 million); Fifth Street and Rice Avenue in Oxnard (\$30 million); and Gonzales Road and Oxnard Boulevard (\$30 million).

The transportation bond, approved with 61 percent of the vote, was part of a massive public works package worth \$37.3 billion. Other measures target levee improvements, affordable housing and school construction.

Billions of dollars for road projects could be among the first money to be spent. A state board must decide by early next year how to spend nearly a quarter of the funding on high-priority freeway projects.

Funding for highways and other projects has dwindled while the federal budget has ballooned, forcing state lawmakers to debate how to pay for improvements: Ask taxpayers to approve super-sized public debt or let companies manage toll roads and other public assets for profit?

"This is one of the signs of a new reality in the purveyance of infrastructure across the country," said Everett Ehrlich,

executive director of the Commission on Public Infrastructure at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank.

"Voters said they are willing to bear the costs and are unwilling to wait for the feds to get their act together. That California would see it in its best interest to go it alone and make such a sizable new investment in its future is in many ways new and different."

Critics say California voters made a mistake. The borrowing will top \$73 billion once the bonds are paid off with interest in 30 years, thrusting the state deeper into debt just as it is rebounding from the dot-com bust. That could lead to cuts in funding for social services and other programs.

That amount is greater than the annual spending plans in every state except California and nearly five times the cost of Boston's Big Dig highway and tunnel project.

Supporters — most prominently Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger — argue that the benefits of highway and public transit improvements, better-equipped schools and reduced threats of flooding will be worth the cost. That is especially true, they say, in a state predicted to swell by the population of Ohio over the next 10 years.

In Ventura County, Gherardi said, there's no sales tax for transportation, so "the only way to get these projects funded or under way is with a stable source of funding at the state."

— Wire services contributed to this report.

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