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Transportation projects funded

Carpool lanes, rural road in capital area will get bond money.

By Tony Bizjak - Bee Staff Writer

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California's large urban areas, including Sacramento, won big Wednesday in statewide competition for the first wave of transportation bond money.

Convening in Irvine under an intense political spotlight, California Transportation Commission members spread \$4.5 billion in voter-approved "corridor mobility" funds among some 50 projects -- what state officials called the largest outlay of transportation money in years.

Much of it went to new carpool lanes on freeways in Los Angeles, San Diego, the Bay Area and Sacramento.

A surprise addition was \$22 million to widen and straighten a small but key rural road in eastern Sacramento County -- White Rock Road between Sunrise Boulevard and Prairie City Road.

CTC Executive Director John Barna said the White Rock Road project won last-minute funding after Sacramento officials made a persuasive pitch that the road will take cars off congested Highway 50.

Widening of White Rock Road to four lanes, will begin by 2011, said county transportation head Tom Zlotkowski. It could become the first section of the region's long-discussed beltway from Elk Grove to El Dorado Hills.

Commuters who now "slug it out on Highway 50, will be able to take White Rock and get where they are going a little faster and safer," Zlotkowski said.

The Sacramento region placed several other projects on the funding list, including a carpool lane project on Highway 50 in El Dorado County, and another on 50 in Sacramento County between Sunrise Boulevard and Watt Avenue.

Placer County won funding for several linked freeway widening projects on I-80 through the notorious Roseville bottleneck between the Sacramento County line and the Highway 65 junction.

Widening began recently on a section of that freeway, with additional widening expected in 2008 and 2009.

A plan to build a Highway 65 bypass around the city of Lincoln also won state funding Wednesday.

Sacramento officials, however, failed to land funds for carpool lanes on I-80 from Longview Drive to the Sacramento River. Barna said that project could qualify later this year when more bond funds are disbursed.

Nevada County officials won financing to widen Highway 49 in the La Barr Meadows area south of Grass Valley.

Overall, the San Francisco Bay Area scored the bulk of Northern California's congestion-relief funds, mostly for carpool lanes. Another \$175 million was set aside for a fourth bore at the Caldecott Tunnel on Highway 24.

In Southern California, Los Angeles scored a major win by landing the largest sum for a single project -- \$730 million for carpool lanes on the northbound 405 freeway between Interstate 10 and Highway 101.

Los Angeles leaders, angered that the 405 project was left off an earlier funding list, had threatened to scuttle the entire CTC project list in the state Legislature.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger said the CTC list was "balanced."

"Because of our combined efforts, traffic congestion will be eased, air quality will be improved and most importantly, state government will continue to work for the people of California," he said.

The contested \$4.5 billion represents the first disbursement from the \$19.9 billion Proposition 1B state transportation infrastructure bond act approved by voters in November.

The initial money was designated in the bond act for congestion relief and for better connections on rural highways. Funded projects are required to begin construction by 2012. CTC officials said they hope many of the projects will get going several years sooner than that.

The CTC will forward its project list to the state Legislature, which is expected to determine how much to allocate to the program in the next few years of state budgets.

Later bond funding rounds will focus on freight movement, public transit, highway rehabilitation, local streets and port improvements and air quality.

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