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San Diego Continues Work on 3 Major Fwy. Projects

Village News Network, CA - February 10, 2009

SAN DIEGO – The unprecedented collapse in California’s bond funding will not stop the construction of three massive freeway projects underway in San Diego County – at least for the time being. An emergency funding plan backed by the California Transportation Commission will allow the I-15 expansion to continue, despite the state’s nearly \$42 billion budget deficit along with the credit markets meltdown.

As a result, Caltrans officials in Sacramento are getting ready to halt \$1.8 billion worth of public works projects primarily funded by a 2006 state bond measure.

The commission unanimously decided to permit an \$80 million funding swap to allow the expansion of the I-15 express lane network to continue, however. The cost of construction in the coming months will be funded with local and federal funds previously set aside for I-15 improvements by the San Diego Association of Governments, or SANDAG. The commission is also moving toward short-term funding transfers to keep crews working on state Route 905 in Otay Mesa and the Route 92 extension in Santee.

Caltrans officials in San Diego said if the three local projects were shut down, an estimated 6,400 construction workers and others would be unemployed, and would cost at least \$19 million to suspend work and restart it later.

Indiana House Passes \$1B Road Stimulus Package

Associated Press – February 10, 2009

Indiana - The Indiana House approved a massive state stimulus package this week designed to create jobs by funneling \$1 billion toward road and infrastructure projects. The road funding bill would direct \$500 million to cities and towns for local projects and \$500 million to counties.

The package would obtain funding from three sources: \$250 million from anticipated federal stimulus money, \$250 million in federal money the state has in several highway accounts and \$500 million from an interest-earning fund established in 2006 from the lease of the Indiana Toll Road.

The bill's Democratic sponsor, Terri Austin, said the \$1 billion proposal could create jobs for 40,000 to 50,000 people. "People need help now," she said. "They need jobs." The bill's democratic supporters said it uses funds that were put away for tough times like these.

Miami-Dade Grand Jury: Raise Transit Fees

Miami-Herald - February 9, 2009

Florida - A Miami-Dade grand jury criticized elected officials for the unsuccessful half-cent sales tax approved by voters in 2002 that was expected to vastly expand the inadequate mass transit system. The 21-member jury concluded that leaders need to make politically unpopular moves such as raising the tax another half-cent to repair the deficits in the agency and finally expand the system throughout the county.

"Although others may have oversold the People's Transportation Plan and broke promises to those who supported the ordinance," the report stated, "it is the responsibility of our present elected leaders to step up to the plate and communicate to the citizens how they plan to deliver on those promises."

The grand jury's report details many broken promises from the 2002 tax campaign, which it says failed to foresee how much maintenance and operation money would be needed. The jurors concluded that in order to fix the system, options must be considered including ending or overhauling the free rides for senior citizens, reinstating fares in the downtown Metromover and/or requiring disabled passengers to pay more for paratransit rides.

More Michigan Roads Crumble to Gravel, Study Reports

Detroit Free Press – February 9, 2009

Michigan – County road agencies in Michigan are increasingly allowing paved roads to crumble into gravel and now are forced to take additional drastic measures as a result of road funding shortfalls, according to a survey released this week. The County Road Association of Michigan survey said that in 2008, 23 counties reverted paved roads to gravel because they lacked the

resources to maintain the pavement in safe driving conditions. Only seven counties made that decision the previous year.

"We are literally reverting to the stone age," said the association's director John Niemela. "Unfortunately, we know this trend will continue unless funding for Michigan's road agencies is increased substantially."

The survey also found that after two costly winters in a row for snow removal, combined with skyrocketing material costs and funding cuts, has forced the state's 83 county road agencies to cutback on preventative maintenance that extends the road's lifespan. The situation is "a pay now or pay more down the road scenario," said Niemela. "The longer we underfund transportation in Michigan, the more it will cost to bring our infrastructure back to a state of good condition."

Stimulus Projects Bound by U.S. Rules

Reuters – February 11, 2009

WASHINGTON – Transportation and infrastructure projects paid for under the Obama administration's economic stimulus package will be required to meet environmental checks and other regulations, Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood announced on Wednesday.

"These projects are going to be funded by the book, by the rules and regulations that have been established," LaHood told reporters at the White House after meeting with transportation officials from across the nation.

President Barack Obama hopes rapid investment in transportation projects will create jobs, but LaHood emphasizes that states should choose projects that have already passed the required checks and approvals. "The states should send to us those projects that have been sitting on a shelf for two or three years. They've got to be ready to go. They've got to have environmental requirements met. No shortcuts," he said.

U.S. congressional negotiators reported this week that they had agreed upon a \$789 billion package of spending and tax cuts, a portion of which could fund extensive improvements to the nation's infrastructure.



After the TARP debacle, the transportation industry has required greater oversight and accountability with the infrastructure stimulus money than was required of banks for the billions they received. A system of oversight for transportation dollars is already in place. Hopefully, the USDOT will not overreact to the TARP criticisms. In my experience in government, those in charge may interpret "following the rules" in different ways. In one public agency I am familiar with a new procurement officer was hired. It turns out he was so consumed by "following the rules" that the agency was brought to it's knees in terms of buying virtually anything; shut down completely. The rules hadn't changed, just the manner in which this person "followed the rules." Let's follow the rules but remember that the public won't be happy about rule compliance but no transportation projects being built. TW

Understaffed IDOT could Lose Stimulus Funds

Land Line Magazine – February 11, 2009

Illinois - Faced with the risk of possibly losing their share of the desperately-needed proposed economic stimulus funding nearing finalization on Capital Hill, Illinois transportation officials are working hard to ensure the agency meets the necessary guidelines laid out by the Federal Highway Administration. The Illinois Department of Transportation received a letter from the FHWA earlier this month stating concerns that IDOT was understaffed and not equipped to fulfill the \$1 billion in projects outlined in the proposed stimulus package.

The FHWA urged Illinois officials to take “urgent actions” with project planning and staffing or, under the worst-case scenario, face possibly losing funding. IDOT spokesperson Paris Ervin said the agency is taking the FHWA letter more as a guideline containing staffing recommendations than a threat. “We are committed and do what is necessary to obtain the funding available to get transportation projects underway,” said Ervin.

Illinois has a stimulus task force to ensure the state does not lose its funding, according to Ervin, adding that the FHWA did not detail the exact number for IDOT’s staff. The Associated Press reports that IDOT had 7,800 employees in 2002, but that number dropped to 6,250 in 2008. Hiring freezes, unfilled openings, layoffs and a voluntary retirement package implemented by then Gov. Rod Blagojevich in 2003 are all contributing factors.

Ervin said the FHWA letter primarily contained procedural recommendations; including updating the state’s six-year, \$16.6-billion project list and dealing with staffing issues.

Tolls should Focus on Congestion, not Revenue

The Stamford Advocate – February 10, 2009

Connecticut - Tolls may have benefits other than just revenue, according to a planning group in southwestern Connecticut that is asking the state to consider using tolls instead as a means of getting cars off the highways. The state is conducting a \$1 million study of congestion pricing and electronic tolling and the South Western Regional Planning Agency members have requested it focus on congestion pricing, which varies tolls based on the amount of traffic and encourages the use of mass transit instead.

The state, however, wants the study to focus on the revenue-generating aspect of tolling. Most of the study’s options, such as mileage-based charges, tolling cars at state borders and building tolled lanes along the highways allowing cars to travel faster, would generate revenue, but not reduce traffic, according to the SWRPA.

SWRPA Executive Director Floyd Lapp and Weston First Selectman Woody Bliss sent a letter to Gov. M. Jodi Rell, Transportation Commissioner Joseph Marie and the state Transportation Strategy Board requesting modifications to the study currently underway. The study also includes an option to toll trucks only, but that has minimal value because truckers typically travel before or after rush hour to avoid the congestion, Bliss said.

"The point is not to generate money but to create incentives for people not to travel on the road when it is busiest," he said. "Border tolling has nothing to do with congestion pricing, and the same with truck-only tolling."

Rell has stated that she is unlikely to support the return of tolls.

Study Recommends Moving Colorado Freight Rail Lines

Denver Daily News – February 11, 2009

Colorado - Freight lines that delay Denver commuter traffic and congest the rails for passenger trains should be moved to the eastern plains of Colorado, according to recommendations made by state transportation officials in a study released this week. The Colorado Department of Transportation's Colorado Rail Relocation Implementation Study examined the benefits and costs of constructing possible rail bypass routes for freight trains.

The report's findings stated that the estimated \$797 million cost to bypass freight trains to eastern Colorado from the Front Range would be a worthwhile investment as it would reduce operating costs, noise, fuel expenses and train activity in the state's urban areas. Bypassing the freight trains would also allow increased commuter rail capacity to and from Denver.

"The Public Benefits Study concluded that the citizens of Colorado would accrue more than sufficient benefits to warrant the investment of public dollars in the proposed relocation project," the study said.



Study after study recommends moving freight lines out of cities and towns to reduce conflicts and other impacts. They make total sense and would be a wonderful change in the overall system by allowing other transportation improvements to proceed unimpeded. In the end, with money so tight for other projects, even logical and compelling projects like this never go anywhere. It's just too expensive and those making the decisions generally turn to other projects. TW

Mass. Begins Brawl on Spending its Bonus

Boston Globe – February 11, 2009

Massachusetts - Officials in Massachusetts have begun to debate how the state's portion of the proposed federal stimulus funds should be spent. Mayors have been composing lists of needs while complaining the governor may direct more of the money to state projects rather than municipal roads and bridges. The state expects to receive about \$11 billion over 2 years, with an anticipated \$1 billion for infrastructure improvements, and competition for the money in the state is already fierce.

"The concept that one person, who is politically elected, is the sole person to decide where the money should go, just doesn't seem right," said U.S. Rep. Michael Capuano, a Somerville Democrat and frequent supporter of Gov. Deval Patrick. "I would argue that no individual should

be given that sole authority. When I said money should go to the Longfellow Bridge, it's an earmark," he added. "But when Governor Patrick says it, it's a worthy idea."

"The mayors are furious," said Mayor Michael D. Bissonnette of Chicopee, which has a list of about \$200 million in infrastructure projects. "It's just a harbinger of what you're going to see with what could potentially be an \$11 billion battle in the commonwealth – and probably every state in the union – over who's going to make the decisions about the allocations."

The Patrick administration has received lists from local officials across the state with their top projects, which has not been made public but is said to total about 4,500 projects. "They've all submitted everything – including the Taj Mahal in every town – from with lists they've had for years," said Senate President Therese Murray in an interview. "It's probably, what, \$4 trillion?"



A little money makes people act in strange ways. A lot of money makes people do and say things you can't believe. Don't worry, Massachusetts isn't the only state where there will be a fistfight to determine who gets what stimulus money. Who said, "Roads aren't political?" TW