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Last push on Natomas carpool lanes

By Tony Bizjak - Bee Staff Writer

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Five Sacramento-area transportation projects won spots Monday on a statewide finalist list for major bond funding -- but some local leaders expressed bewilderment over one that was left off.

Sacramento planners were hoping to see their \$179 million plan for carpool lanes on Interstate 80 in Natomas on the list released Monday by the California Transportation Commission. The I-80 project is on a list of projects Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger suggested the planners consider.

"We are frankly befuddled as to why the CTC staff is not recommending it," said Mike McKeever, executive director of the Sacramento Area Council of Governments, the region's transportation planning body.

McKeever said he and other officials will lobby state commissioners for a reversal before planners meet Wednesday to decide how to disburse \$4.5 billion in new bond money.

CTC staffers responded Monday that they have received similar arguments from officials across the state, but had to leave off many projects because there isn't enough money.

"The amount of funds available is a fraction of what is needed," said John Barna, commission executive director. "We've laid out something we think is fair and reasonable."

The list -- 50 projects statewide -- represents the first outlay from a \$19.9 billion transportation infrastructure bond measure approved by California voters last year.

That initial \$4.5 billion is mostly targeted at congestion relief on major corridors. It has ignited one of the hottest, most politicized transportation financing battles in the state in years.

CTC staff initially proposed spending only \$2.8 billion of the money this year, but expanded their list Monday to the \$4.5 billion after a firestorm of criticism, much of it from Los Angeles and Bay Area leaders arguing that congestion in their areas requires more money for more projects, now.

The new list includes \$730 million for carpool lanes on the 405 freeway and \$387 million on upgrades to Interstate 5 in Los Angeles.

In Sacramento, five projects recommended for \$237 million in funds are:

- New carpool lanes on Highway 50 in El Dorado County from Bass Lake Road to the Sacramento County line.
- New carpool lanes on Highway 50 in Sacramento County from Sunrise Boulevard to Watt Avenue.
- Two installments of carpool lanes and auxiliary lanes on Interstate 80 through Roseville.
- Realignment of Highway 65 to bypass the city of Lincoln.
- Widening of Highway 49 in the La Barr Meadows area of Nevada County.

Officials in Placer and El Dorado counties said they were pleased their projects made the list, but said they remain on edge pending the commission's decision Wednesday.

"Nothing is over until it's over," said Celia McAdam, executive director of the Placer County Transportation Planning Agency.

McAdam said she intends to fly to Irvine for the Wednesday CTC meeting to continue talking up the

I-80 project, considered necessary for easing the Roseville bottleneck. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get some projects that are sitting around done and off the table."

Should the I-80 carpool project fail to win inclusion, officials here said they will look for other funds, including later disbursements from the state bonds.

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