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Highway 50 widening project pushed to create more jobs

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Citing an urgency to create jobs now, the Schwarzenegger administration has proposed fast-tracking a controversial widening of Highway 50 by forgoing a court-mandated environmental review.

The carpool lanes between Sunrise Boulevard and Watt Avenue are among 11 projects Caltrans is promoting for environmental exemptions as part of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's economic stimulus proposal.

"We have a state economy in terrible trouble and a governor and Legislature that are looking to create jobs," Caltrans' Sacramento-area director Jody Jones said.

"This project would create lots of jobs."

Environmentalists and community activists called the state's plan cynical.

"I am astounded at the length Caltrans is willing to go to avoid giving an honest accounting of the environmental impacts of the Highway 50 project," said Eric Davis of the Environmental Council of Sacramento.

"It's entirely inconsistent with what the governor has been saying about wanting reduction of greenhouse gas emissions."

The \$165 million project could be under construction by next summer – 18 months early – if the Legislature, now meeting in urgency session, agrees in the coming weeks to exempt it, Caltrans' Jones said.

Such a move would pre-empt state law that normally requires major projects to be analyzed in detail for impacts on neighboring communities and on air and water quality.

Caltrans has conducted an environmental review of the Highway 50 project, but a Sacramento judge in July determined the review was inadequate in several areas, including a failure to assess the project's potential impact on global warming.

Caltrans initially agreed to redo its environmental analysis. But officials now say the state's economic woes take precedence.

They point out the state has done this before, when it exempted seismic retrofit projects on state bridges after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

Jones and Caltrans Director Will Kempton said the agency intends to keep its previous financial commitments to neighboring communities to help reduce the negative effects of the Highway 50 expansion.

Two other planned Sacramento transportation projects are on the state's fast-track list.

One, budgeted at \$8.5 million, involves adding auxiliary lanes on a short section of Highway 99, running between the on- and offramps between Calvine and Mack roads.

City officials said they are puzzled to see the other project on the list.

Caltrans says it wants to speed up the \$52 million plan to move the railroad tracks in the downtown Sacramento railyard so that more development can occur.

But the environmental review is nearly done, city official Fran Halbakken said, and the city already has the project fast-tracked for construction by next summer.

"We can't do it faster than we already are," Halbakken said.

Also on the list: a new approach structure in San Francisco for the Golden Gate Bridge and widening projects on Highway 99 in San Joaquin, Fresno and Tehama counties.

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