

Dan Walters: It affects millions, but state's transportation crisis is still ignored

By Dan Walters -- Bee Columnist

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Bob Balgenorth, a member of the California Transportation Commission, succinctly described the state's transportation mess recently to a legislative committee: "We don't have any money."

Since 2001, when the state's chronic budget crisis first emerged, the Legislature and two governors have shifted more than \$4 billion from funds that were supposed to build transportation projects, highways mostly, into the state's general fund to stanch the flow of red ink.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger touted highway construction in his State of the State address in January, saying, "Californians can't get from place to place on little fairy wings. This is a car-centered state. We need roads." Nevertheless, he wants to continue the diversions in 2005-06, tapping another \$1.1 billion in transportation money to shore up the general fund.

"It leaves us in very dire straits," Balgenorth told lawmakers, adding that 6,000 state and local projects have been stalled since diversions began.

Were California a stagnant society, putting transportation projects on hold might be tolerable, but we're adding about 600,000 people to our population and about 500,000 vehicles to our roadways every year. And actual vehicle-miles of travel are increasing even faster.

Even before the diversions began, California was not keeping up with transportation demand. Highway construction slowed to a near-halt in the 1970s and has never resumed a vigorous pace. Meanwhile, as cars became more fuel-efficient, revenue stagnated from gas taxes, based on gallonage. Increasingly, those taxes were shifted into maintenance as the highway system aged and was pounded by ever-heavier traffic.

In the 1990s, Republican lawmakers began agitating for shifting the sales taxes on fuel from the state's general fund into transportation to generate badly needed construction funds, and, after years of partisan squabbling, voters approved the shift in 2002.

Proposition 42, however, contained an escape clause allowing the Legislature and the governor to suspend its provisions if the money was needed to cover budget deficits, and ever since, virtually all of the Proposition 42 money has been diverted back into the general fund.

"The answer is more money somehow," Balgenorth told lawmakers. But the politics of transportation financing are, to put it mildly, tricky.

Democratic lawmakers have tagged Proposition 42 diversions as a major issue this year and are criticizing Schwarzenegger for proposing another \$1.1 billion raid - notwithstanding the fact that Democrats didn't like Proposition 42 in the first place, and notwithstanding their votes for diversion in previous years. This year's newly found affection for Proposition 42, then, is mostly a political ploy. Democrats want to rough up Schwarzenegger for other reasons and believe that congestion is a popular cause.

That said, Schwarzenegger can be fairly criticized for not putting money where his mouth has been, not only because he wants to continue the diversions for another year, but because last year's gimmick - tapping revenue from Indian gambling casinos to restore highway funds - turned out to be a nonstarter.

As long as the Proposition 42 diversions continue, they poison the atmosphere for raising gasoline taxes, or reconfiguring the gas tax to account for rising fuel efficiency. And voters are also becoming resistant to local sales taxes for transportation - a program that began two decades ago because of the state's abdication of responsibility. Seventeen of the state's 58 counties now levy special sales taxes for transportation, but overall, only 13 of 53 recent local sales tax proposals have garnered the necessary two-thirds support from voters.

The ever-growing backlog of projects, transit as well as highways, is not static. In many cases, they are ready to go to bid, but their environmental impact reports expire after a few years, and if they remain on the shelf when their EIRs expire, the whole process must begin anew, adding more cost and delay.

This is a genuine crisis, one that affects virtually every Californian and that threatens the state's economic viability. Why it's not getting the serious, bipartisan political attention it deserves is an unfathomable mystery.

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