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More money for roads is only half the job

By: HOWARD KALOOGIAN

Gov. Schwarzenegger is keeping his promise: State lawmakers can no longer treat gasoline taxes and other transportation dollars as their own personal checking account.

Starting this year, state taxes that are collected for roads must be spent on roads. Not prison guard salaries. Not new social programs. Not gold-plated pensions for public employee unions. Just roads.

This is welcome news to those of us who have watched highway funds disappear for years while our transportation problems mounted.

The governor should be commended for facing down the big spenders. But there is still more work to do because state lawmakers are not the only ones frittering away scarce transportation tax dollars.

And that work has to start right here in San Diego. Local groups and elected officials have also depleted our transportation funds by stopping or delaying every new road project in San Diego for the last 25 years.

They have lots of different names, including the Sierra Club, the Center for Biological Diversity and their allies in local elected offices and bureaucracies.

But they all see destroying new roads as a major part of their mission.

The perfect case study is Highway 56 in North San Diego.

First planned 50 years ago, it was finally funded in 1984, when \$50 million was set aside for this critical east-west connector between Interstates 5 and 15. This connection was important because as much as 25 percent of the north-south

traffic in San Diego really wanted to go east-west, but could not. Thus the need for Highway 56.

Soon after the planning and funding were complete, the environmental lawsuits began. Environmentalists didn't like the route, so it was changed. They didn't like the habitat preservation plan, so it was changed too. And the water running off the roads was not to their liking, so that was also altered.

All that lawyering came with quite a cost: Completed in 2004, Highway 56 was 20 years late and more than \$100 million over budget.

Anyone traveling Interstates 8 or 15 during the last 15 years knows the result: Traffic was horrific. But the crazy thing is that the same environmentalists who created the logjam were the first and the loudest to complain about traffic.

This is the story of every transportation project in every part of San Diego.

These delays for Highway 56 not only victimized the people of North San Diego, they also created havoc in the East County. Because all that extra money for Highway 56 had to come from somewhere. And that somewhere was Santee.

Here's what happened: In 1987, voters approved the first sales tax increase to pay for new roads. With this money, several large roads were built in and around Santee, all converging where Route 52 was supposed to hook up with Route 67.

But because of the delays to Highway 56, the money to connect 52 and 67 ran out. The result: Santee was out of luck. All the traffic that was supposed to flow smoothly on this new system of highways was instead dumped into the streets of

Santee. Almost overnight Santee began to experience some of the worst traffic congestion in the county, even though its population had actually shrunk.

To solve the Santee and other problems, two months ago San Diego voters were asked to extend the sales tax for new roads. Guess who led the fight against more money for roads?

You guessed it. The same folks whose lawsuits and delays created the horrific cost overruns in North County were now urging people to vote against the sales tax increase because there were too many cost overruns.

Voters saw through that ruse. The ballot measure passed with more than two-thirds of the vote. And the Santee connection, promised so long ago, is now going to be among the first projects undertaken with the new money.

So the people of Santee are getting guaranteed traffic relief, 15 years late, no thanks to Sierra Club or the Center for Biological Diversity and their allies in the bureaucracy outside of Santee.

That's the good news. The bad news is that these folks have not gone away. They are still out there, still trying to stop new roads and create more traffic congestion all over San Diego, all in the name of something they call environmentalism, but which is in fact thinly veiled extortion.

They have to be stopped. The governor did his part. Now it is up to us to do ours.

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