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Navigation

- [Home](#) ▶
- [Columnists](#) ▶
- [Classifieds](#) ▶
- [Community](#) ▶
- [Photography](#) ▶
- [Features](#) ▶
- [Coupons](#)
- [Services](#) ▶
- [Sudoku](#)
- [Site Map](#)

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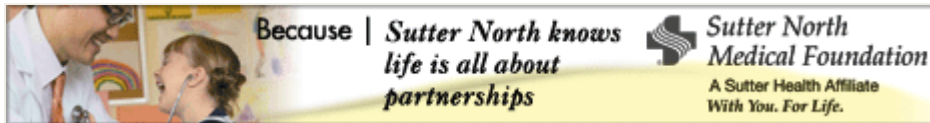
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Classified Search

Web Search

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- [Our Levees, A Special Report](#)
- [Builders and Developers](#)
- [House to Home](#)
- [Spirit of Freedom 2005](#)
- [Our Town](#)
- [In Memory of Hardie](#)
- [In Memory of McCullough](#)



Editorial

Politics kill infrastructure bond measure

No infrastructure deal is better than a bad infrastructure deal. So Californians should rejoice that the state Legislature and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger were unable to come to an agreement before last Wednesday's deadline to put on the June ballot an initiative to rebuild parts of the state's crumbling infrastructure.

The sticking points were that the Democrats filled the initiative proposal with pork that included local parks, housing (which should only be provided by the private sector), mass-transit schemes and school construction (even though Proposition 39 made it easy for local school districts to pass bonds with a 55 percent vote). Meanwhile, Republicans were insisting that an initiative must ease environmental laws that hinder construction and prevailing union-wage laws that increase construction costs. So the potential deal fell apart.

Up against a deadline, had a deal been struck, legislators would have had only a few hours to read legislation running to hundreds of pages of bureaucratese. Now, at least they can take a little more time to craft legislation for an initiative before budget negotiations begin soon - if they have a mind to.

To get on the November ballot, the ultimate deadline set by the Secretary of State is mid-August. But, practically, most work would need to be done before negotiations over the 2006-07 budget begin in mid-May. In a conference call Thursday with editorial writers, Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez said he hopes that an agreement can be made with the governor before the Legislature takes its Easter recess.

Although the governor's overall proposal includes \$222 billion in infrastructure improvements, the main part is the \$72 billion he's seeking (up from \$68 billion earlier this year) in bonds that would be repaid from the general fund. The major alternative was \$49 billion offered by the Assembly Democratic leadership, which also would be repaid from the general fund. (The rest of the \$222 billion would come from other sources, such as federal funds and user fees.)

All along we have pointed out that, given the \$6 billion structural annual deficit the state still faces, a better idea would be to make all projects paid for by users through such things as toll roads built with public-private partnerships, with no general-fund bonds issued.

Unfortunately, when public-private toll roads were brought up in Thursday's conference call, Núñez derided them as "Lexus lanes leaving the common people behind" - which would be news to the thousands of everyday citizens who benefit from the toll roads. He insisted that toll roads must be "part of a large package" - meaning, we presume, all the other items he wants in the infrastructure bond.

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It hardly needs to be pointed out that this battle over infrastructure spending is taking place in an election year, and that “Democrats are smelling blood with Gov. Schwarzenegger,” said Steven Frates, senior fellow at the Rose Institute of State and Local Government at Claremont McKenna College. “They don’t want him to have a non-partisan political victory” in putting a bond measure on the ballot, which would be “something he could campaign on.”

Legislative Democrats' major goal, Frates added, is to gain the governor's seat in November. “Everything is colored by that political situation. The political calculus favors the Democrats.”

If no deal is reached by November, the governor could blame a recalcitrant Democratic Legislature. But the Democrats could, in turn, craft an initiative that the governor would reject, then blame him.

Despite the political shenanigans, we hope all sides can come up with a constructive solution - using primarily private means.

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