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Paving way for 605/10 funding

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Mar. 19--After all the press conferences, letters and lobbying by officials from local cities, the fate of the crowded interchange at the heart of the San Gabriel Valley came down to a single conference call.

The call took place on Feb. 27 between Metropolitan Transportation Authority officials and local legislators including Assemblyman Ed Hernandez, D-West Covina, Assemblyman Bob Huff, R-Diamond Bar, Los Angeles County Supervisor Gloria Molina and state Sen. Gloria Romero, D-Los Angeles.

Hernandez described it as a vigorous discussion of the need to fund a \$70 million upgrade to the junction of the 10 and 605 freeways.

By late that day, the officials received assurances from the California Transportation Commission that the project would be funded, even though the San Gabriel Valley would see none of the \$4.5 billion in freeway improvements made available by Proposition 1B, approved by the voters last November.

Officials agree the unification of various Valley cities behind the interchange project made a difference in securing the state funds, and that this impromptu coalition may help in lobbying for future area projects.

But despite this unprecedented collaboration between cities with varying interests, in the end it was standard political arm-twisting behind closed doors -- during that late February conference call -- that led to real results for the Valley.

"Without a doubt the good old-fashioned politicking is part of what we do, and what we did in this case," said Roxane Marquez, Molina's press deputy.

Marquez said the support from Valley cities was imperative in showing that the legislators negotiating with the MTA and the state had the backing of their constituents.

"It was vital because other areas, such as West L.A. had more than their fair share of folks lobbying for them, so we had to show we had an equal amount of strength," she said.

But she added that it is only in one-on-one negotiations that the true impact of the project could be conveyed.

"Our big goal was to show how the 10/605 interchange is to the San Gabriel Valley what the 405 and 101 interchange is to the San Fernando Valley," Marquez said. "If you don't get out of downtown and the Westside, it is hard to see how true that statement is."

An average of 438,000 vehicles use the 605/10 interchange daily, making it the 19th busiest in the state, according to Caltrans statistics. The 405/101 interchange handles about 632,000 vehicles daily.

Hernandez said that having local cities backing him up helped in the negotiations.

"We asked all the cities in my district to look at passing resolutions in support of the project and write letters," he said. "When we had the lobbying effort involving the masses, they listened."

Ben Jong, a transportation planning manager for Caltrans, said construction on the interchange upgrades could begin as soon as the middle of 2008. The project will involve the construction of a flyover connecting the south 605 and eastbound 10 freeway routes.

The unification of Valley cities behind the project was unprecedented, said West Covina Councilman Steve Herfert.

"This has done more for the San Gabriel Valley than anything in the last 10 years," he said, noting that South El Monte, Baldwin Park, La Puente, Azusa and West Covina all were involved in the lobbying effort. "Suddenly we had 10, 15 electeds at an MTA meeting. And I think you will see that continue at future meetings as well."

Herfert said there was even talk of the cities hiring a lobbyist together to help secure future transportation funding. But he also credited the local legislators for acting as the spearhead in the 605/10 effort.

Baldwin Park Councilman Ricardo Pacheco concurred.

"Everyone helped out however they could," Pacheco said, noting that as head of the San Gabriel Valley Caucus in the legislature, Hernandez's role was crucial. "I really credit Hernandez with bringing the issue to the front of the line and getting everybody behind it."

The coalition of local cities definitely had an effect on the interchange funding, said Douglas Johnson, a consulting fellow with the **Rose Institute** of State and Local Government at Claremont McKenna College. But he added that the Valley love fest may be short-lived.

"This is all driven by self-interest; that mess of an interchange dumps so many commuters onto surrounding streets that it really extends the impact far beyond the immediate area," Johnson said. "But for other projects like the Gold Line, the regional impact on traffic will be almost nothing."

In that case, it may be difficult for cities without Gold Line stops, like West Covina or Baldwin Park, to lend their support, he said.

"Mayors will have to explain to their constituents why they are supporting a project that is not going to provide a direct benefit to them," Johnson said.

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