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From the Los Angeles Times

O.C. tollway veto means another project must be substituted, planners say

The Foothill South would have promoted carpool use and provided emission credits, key to state and federal funding.

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The apparent demise of a toll road through San Onofre State Beach could have a domino effect on funding for other Southern California transportation projects, a regional planning authority said this week.

A letter sent to Orange County transportation planners by the Southern California Assn. of Governments warns that if the Foothill South tollway is not built, another project must be substituted in SCAG's Regional Transportation Plan. Otherwise, the region runs the risk of violating federal emissions standards and losing funding, because projects not included in the plan are ineligible for state and federal dollars.

The region's freeways are the nation's most congested, and its air quality is among the worst. The 16-mile turnpike that would have cut through San Onofre State Beach was designated as a transportation control measure because it would have promoted carpool use and provided emission credits, said Hasan Ikhata, SCAG's executive director.

So when the state Coastal Commission vetoed the toll road last month, it quite possibly threw the entire transportation plan for the region into disarray -- and potentially put the South Coast Air Basin in violation of the federal Clean Air Act.

Under federal law, SCAG must develop plans for transportation, air quality, aviation and housing in a sprawling region that covers Orange, Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino, Ventura and Imperial counties.

Art Leahy, Orange County Transportation Authority chief executive, said the tollway is in the regional plan "and it's not coming out. Our agency is on record as supporting it."

Although the issue of air quality is very important, Leahy characterized the debate as a "potential problem," not an "imminent" one.

Hypothetically, if the toll road were dropped from the regional plan, it could affect projects in other counties. Finding an alternative project would not be limited to Orange County but within the region, Leahy said.

Richard Dixon, a Lake Forest councilman who serves as SCAG's vice president, expressed concern over whether a substitute project could be found in time or at all -- though Ikhata downplayed any time restriction.

"We're saying right now it's a caution, a warning," Ikhata said. "We're not in any way, shape or form saying we're out of conformity."

Since the tollway veto has been appealed, SCAG is waiting on the toll road agency to say that the San Onofre extension is out of the plan. "If it's out, then we will have to do substitution and figure out what to do," Ikhata said.

The Foothill/Eastern Transportation Corridor Agency has no intention of withdrawing the California 241 extension from the transportation plan, said spokeswoman Jennifer Seaton. The Coastal Commission's decision is on appeal and planning has not stopped, she added.

Environmentalists argue that the state's rejection should have prompted transportation officials to remove the toll road from the regional plan.

"This project has been determined to have violated state environmental law, and it can't remain in the transportation plan. The region has to move forward and amend the plan," said Michael Fitts, an attorney with the Endangered Habitats League, which protested the tollway at the Coastal Commission meeting.

Estimated to cost at least \$875 million to build, Foothill South would have run 16 miles from Oso Parkway in Rancho Santa Margarita to Interstate 5 at Basilone Road south of San Clemente and would have been the final link in Orange County's network of toll roads.

Dixon, who supports building the tollway, has echoed SCAG's warnings to other transportation officials. No other project in the county "would give us the same air quality credits as we get for the toll road," he said.

But some supporters of the toll road disagree.

Denis Bilodeau, a traffic engineering consultant and councilman in Orange, which supports the toll road, said planners could widen Interstate 5 in southern Orange County, increase Amtrak or Metrolink service, and widen roads that parallel I-5.

The region receives air emission credits for increasing the number of people in vehicles on freeways. Though there is a carpool lane on the I-5, it doesn't extend to the county line -- it ends in San Juan Capistrano. The average vehicle occupancy for the I-5 is 1.1 people per car, compared with about 1.5 persons for the proposed toll road, Ikhata said.

Fitts and other environmentalists argue there are other options, including more carpool lanes on I-5, dedicated busways and telecommuting.

"The notion that funding for the entire region's transportation system is somehow jeopardized is utterly false, because there are many ways to fix and amend the plan," Fitts said.

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