

Fresno Co. awarded \$55m for highway work

Posted at 12:00 AM on Wednesday, May. 12, 2010

By Russell Clemings / The Fresno Bee

Fresno County won a surprise \$55 million in federal transportation funding Tuesday and will use the money for a makeover of a notorious local freeway bottleneck.

Caltrans announced that work on the "braided ramps" project on Highway 180 between Highways 41 and 168 could start as soon as next year under a plan that starts construction while final design work is still under way.

The project is expected to relieve a major source of driver stress at a pair of interchanges where cars and trucks have to merge in conflicting directions. Once the work is completed, new overpasses will separate the traffic streams from each other and reduce the conflicts.

The agency's regional planning chief, Sharri Bender Ehlert, said the new funding came through just as Caltrans officials were preparing to ask the California Transportation Commission to award money to the project from Proposition 1B, a 2006 state bond issue. Now, she said, surplus federal funds will be used instead.

"We had additional federal authority that we had to use before the end of the fiscal year," she said. "We're actually able to advance construction by several years."

The \$55 million in federal funds will be supplemented by \$14.5 million from Measure C, Fresno County's half-cent transportation sales tax. That's less than half as much local money as was set aside for the project in the 2006 Measure C vote. The difference is accounted for in part by the federal funding and the recession's impact on construction costs.

Until the new funding came in, construction on the project had been scheduled to start in 2013, and then only on the north side of Highway 180. The south side would have been started two years later.

Now, Ehlert said, construction on both sides might start sometime in the 2010-11 fiscal year, which begins July 1. An environmental report has to be completed first; that milestone is expected to be reached late this year. Construction is expected to take roughly two years.

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