

Stimulus funds could ease freeway commute

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By Mark Grossi / The Fresno Bee

Federal stimulus money might be used to ease dangerous commute congestion at the junction of three Fresno freeways -- five years ahead of schedule.

Transportation officials will know by early September if the \$31 million project makes the short list among more than 100 California proposals. The final funding decision is expected later this year.

The project would separate merging traffic on westbound Highway 180 between highways 168 and 41 where rush-hour traffic slows to a crawl.

Officials say Fresno has a decent chance, partly because the project price tag has dropped by about half over the last two years, mostly because of the bad economy.

Local construction work is scarce, so many companies are competing for California Department of Transportation projects. That is driving down costs, which lowered the estimate to a level that federal officials are more likely to approve.



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Vehicles would go from Highway 168 to westbound Highway 180 in the future by entering an offramp bridge.

"We have a 50-50 shot," said Neil Bretz, Fresno-based project manager for Caltrans.

If the project is funded with the stimulus money, it could be built by February 2012, far ahead of the original target date in 2017. Otherwise, the project will have to wait for funding from the half-cent Measure C sales tax money that voters approved in 2006.

The changes would allow vehicles to merge from Highway 168 to westbound Highway 180 by entering an offramp bridge and passing over traffic moving from Highway 180 to northbound Highway 41. Motorists from highways 168 and 180 now must merge together on the same ramp.

There are similar problems for eastbound Highway 180 traffic, but officials opted to focus first on westbound lanes to keep costs down. There is no estimate yet on when an eastbound project might start, but it is expected to cost about \$30 million as well.

Since opening more than a decade ago, the interchange of the three freeways has been crowded during peak hours. There are more than two accidents a week on the interchange.

Improving the interchange was a key project for Measure C sales tax money, but it is not scheduled to be funded from the sales tax until after 2013. It wasn't scheduled sooner because it takes time to raise the \$114 million that officials once estimated as the cost for fixing both east- and west-bound problems.

Even before the interchange was built in the 1990s, Caltrans had planned to later separate the merging traffic with raised, "braided" ramps as traffic increased.

One traffic-reduction option considered by Caltrans was to eliminate existing ramps that allow traffic coming from both directions of Highway 168 to merge onto northbound Highway 41.

The option met resistance from local transportation planning officials and politicians and no longer is being considered, Bretz said.

That's a relief to the critics, including Jeff Reid, former Fresno city manager and now a representative of the Valley Taxpayers Coalition.

"I'm glad," he said. "People have been using [those ramps] for years."

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