

San Diego mayor seeks road money from Washington

by Bethany Leach

WASHINGTON - San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders met behind closed doors Tuesday with federal transportation officials to argue that San Diego should get \$297 million of a \$1.1 billion pot of federal money being made available for innovative programs promising quick results in reducing road congestion.

The money will be shared by as many as five cities pitching new ideas for reducing road congestion by 2009. Other cities in the running for a portion of the money are Atlanta, Dallas, Denver, Minneapolis, St. Paul, Minn., Miami, New York City, San Francisco and Seattle.

ROAD PLANS - San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders discusses road plans. CNS Photo by Michael Temchine.

ROAD MONEY - San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders goes to Washington D.C. to discuss road money. CNS Photo by Michael Temchine..

San Diego's delegation included Sanders, Caltrans Director Will Kempton, Lemon Grove, Calif., Mayor Mary Sessom, SANDAG Executive Director Gary Gallegos, and representatives from the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce.

"One of our advantages in San Diego is that we're a fairly united community," said Gallegos, who believes that the city has a "good shot" at getting at least some money.

The delegation asked for \$297 million for initiatives such as the "swoop" program, which will utilize the shoulder of the I-805 corridor between Chula Vista, Calif., and San Diego for buses during rush hour. With federal help, the plan could be in place within a few months, Gallegos said.

A DOT official sounded positive after meeting with the San Diego delegation.

"We requested that they show a variety of new and short-term congestion strategies that can be implemented now and not 20 years from now," said the official.

Speed and feasibility are "critical" to determining who will get the money, he said, speaking on background in accordance with department policy. DOT Secretary Mary Peters is looking for programs that can be replicated in other urban areas, the official added.

The San Diego delegation met separately with senior officials and technical staff.

"They were both encouraging and critical," Sanders said after the meetings.

One of the questions the group faced was what they would do if they couldn't get the full \$297 million they requested.

"We can't really scale back," Gallegos said. "This is a comprehensive proposal."

Sanders said a lack of federal help would delay but not derail efforts to reduce congestion in San Diego.

"We will still implement our proposal, but it'll just take longer," he said, estimating it would take up to 10 years as opposed to 18 months.

DOT is expected to announce its decision in mid-August.

Bethany Leach is an intern with Copley News Service in Washington.

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