

Valley officials lobby Capitol Hill for more funds

Officials bring wish list to Capitol Hill.

Posted at 09:07 PM on Wednesday, May. 05, 2010

By Michael Doyle / Bee Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON -- San Joaquin Valley officials have brought a billion-dollar wish list to Capitol Hill this week, though they know they'll be lucky to get a fraction of what they're asking for.

Representing eight Valley counties, officials want money for upgrading Highway 99. They want high-speed-rail funding. They'd like help with cleaning the region's air. Housing assistance would be nice, too.

"It doesn't hurt to let them know early and often what you want," Jesse Brown, executive director of the Merced County Association of Governments, said Wednesday.

Brown is one of about 20 representatives of the San Joaquin Valley Regional Policy Council pressing for federal dollars this week. It's the latest chapter in regional lobbying.

Individual Valley counties sent delegations to Washington this year. Often operating under the name "One Voice," the county delegations sought congressional support for their respective priorities.

Now in its second year, the San Joaquin Valley Regional Policy Council's lobbying trip to Washington extends this idea to the broader region between Stockton and Bakersfield. The mayors, county supervisors, county executives and planners refer to their venture as the "Valley Voice" effort.

"The only projects we talk about are the ones we can agree on," said Stanislaus County Supervisor Jeff Grover. "If we can't agree on it, we don't talk about it."

Highway 99 is top priority. In briefings conducted in a fifth-floor House office Wednesday, and over dinner hosted Wednesday night, the Valley officials made their case for \$1 billion worth of specific Highway 99 work.

This includes, for instance, spending \$205 million to widen the highway to six lanes between Prosperity Avenue and Goshen in Tulare County.

The goal is to get as many of the specific Highway 99 projects as possible folded into a transportation authorization bill.

These bills are supposed to be passed every few years, though deadlines sometimes slip.

"I'm just not sure we're going to have a transportation bill this year," cautioned Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Visalia.

Nunes' morning presentation was followed by an appearance by Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, as the delegation tried touching all of the regional bases.

The Valley delegation also is pressing for federal help with a proposed short-haul railroad designed to take farm goods to the Port of Oakland. Officials also want the federal government to pick up half of the cost of a proposed high-speed rail system for which California voters have already approved \$9.9 billion.

Legislatively, Valley officials want the region designated as a new "air quality empowerment zone" that would potentially free up federal grant funding.

"We know that money is tight, and it's going to be a battle," said Madera Mayor Pro Tempore Robert Poythress, "but if we weren't here as a coalition voicing the importance of these projects, we would be further behind the eight ball."

The reporter can be reached at mduoyle@mcclatchydc.com or (202) 383-0006.