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Water bond offers nearly \$2 billion in 'pork'

Wyatt Buchanan, Chronicle Sacramento Bureau
Sunday, November 15, 2009

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(11-15) 04:00 PST Sacramento - --

The \$11 billion water bond that California voters will be asked to approve next year contains nearly \$2 billion in earmarks that lawmakers candidly acknowledge were included in the proposal to win the votes that were needed to pass the plan out of the Legislature.

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Hundreds of millions of dollars of those earmarks - which some lawmakers are calling wasteful pork - would go to projects that would do little, if anything, to increase the state's supply of clean and reliable water.

They include \$100 million for Lake Tahoe, which has perhaps the highest-quality water in the state, and \$40 million for projects in Los Angeles and Orange counties to educate the public about California's water.

Backers of the bond say they hope that the earmarked projects will compel voters from those parts of the state that would benefit from them to support the ballot proposition next November.

"I think you can look at any bond that has been brought forward the last few years and probably find pork in it, but at the end of the day it really becomes a necessity in order to get something like this through the Legislature," said state Sen. Dave Cogdill, R-Modesto, who authored the bond bill, which was signed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger on Tuesday. "You've got to be able to convince the majority of the people in the state that there's something in there for them."

He said he believes this bond has less pork than he's seen in other bond measures.

Some of the earmarks include:

- \$100 million for the Lake Tahoe Environmental Improvement Program for watershed restoration, bike trails and public access and recreation projects.
- \$75 million for the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, for public access, education and interpretive projects, physical projects and "improving community sustainability."
- \$250 million for dam removal on the Klamath River, a project to help restore salmon runs; and another \$20 million for Siskiyou County to soften the impact on the economy

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-- \$20 million for the Baldwin Hills Conservancy to be used to buy land to expand the small conservancy in the Los Angeles hills, which is near the home of Assembly Speaker Karen Bass, D-Baldwin Vista.

-- \$20 million for the Bolsa Chica Wetlands in Huntington Beach (Orange County) for interpretive projects for visitors.

The bond also includes \$1.05 billion in earmarks for "water supply reliability" projects that is divided among various regions of the state. San Francisco Bay would get \$132 million and the Los Angeles region would get \$198 million. No specific projects are outlined in that portion of the bond.

What is and what is not unnecessary spending often is in the eye of the beholder, and lawmakers defend the package as a comprehensive solution to the myriad issues threatening California's water supply. Some of the earmarks clearly are related to water quality and reliability, such as the more than \$1 billion for water reliability projects and \$8 million to help provide clean drinking water in the city of Maywood in Los Angeles County.

Schwarzenegger has said that all the bond money is necessary and that it would not be wasted.

"When you hear about pork, what is for some people pork is for us cleaning up the groundwater. I think it is very important," Schwarzenegger said at the bill-signing ceremony for part of the water package last week.

He said he requested and got an extra billion dollars in the bond shortly before its passage for groundwater cleanup.

In the hours before the water bond was approved by the Legislature during an all-night session earlier this month, lawmakers increased the amount of money for the bond by \$1.15 billion.

The Republican governor predicted that neither the earmarks nor the total price tag would discourage voters from supporting the bond, "because the people of California have a high interest in rebuilding our infrastructure."

Assemblyman Chuck DeVore, R-Irvine, is one of the most vocal critics of the spending proposal and said he would rather have a bond that funds only construction of new dams and other water storage projects and a restoration of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. About \$5.2 billion of the bond package pays for those needs.

"If what we're talking about is the urgent need to add water and fix the ecologically fragile delta, why is it that the price tag for this is a little more than double what it takes to do the job?" DeVore said, adding later, "I just don't see how the state can afford it."

Schwarzenegger said last week that the state will face another brutal year fiscally as the general fund deficit could be \$14 billion next year. The debt on the bond would be repaid from the general fund. Debt payments will eventually reach \$800 million per year on the bond, if approved by voters, according to the nonpartisan Legislative Analyst's Office.

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Catherine Freeman, the water policy analyst at the analyst's office, said that even if voters reject the water bond, the policies the Legislature passed as part of the comprehensive package would still go into effect. Those policies include measures to create a new agency to oversee the delta, monitor groundwater levels and impose a 20 percent conservation mandate on cities.

John Laird, a former lawmaker from Santa Cruz and an expert in water policy, said both the size of the bond and the earmarks could ultimately undermine the bond, which he thinks could have had a lower cost.

"Will people believe they are getting something from it? That's going to be difficult because some people aren't, yet a lot of extra things have been added to make people think they are getting something," Laird said. "It makes it harder to pass in places where they're not getting anything, and it's harder in other places because the ticket price is high."

Hundreds of millions in earmarks

Nearly \$2 billion in earmarked funds are included in the \$11 billion water bond that voters will be asked to approve in November 2010. Some lawmakers have acknowledged that the earmarks were included to get the votes needed to pass the plan out of the Legislature.

- **\$8 million** for drinking water in the city of Maywood (Los Angeles County)
- **\$20 million** for water quality for the New River, which crosses from Mexico into California
- **\$10 million** for the Sierra Nevada Research Institute at UC Merced
- **\$40 million** for San Diego County and the San Diego River Conservancy
- **\$40 million** for the Santa Ana River Parkway, with \$20 million dedicated to the Bolsa Chica Wetlands
- **\$25 million** for the San Joaquin River Conservancy for river parkway projects
- **\$20 million** for the Baldwin Hills Conservancy (Los Angeles County)
- **\$100 million** for the Lake Tahoe Environmental Improvement Program
- **\$75 million** for the Sierra Nevada Conservancy
- **\$100 million** for Salton Sea restoration
- **\$30 million** for "watershed education centers"
- **\$250 million** for dam removal on the Klamath River
- **\$20 million** for economic development in Siskiyou County
- **\$1.05 billion** for water supply reliability projects around the state

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