

Republicans propose bills they say will improve public works

By Steve Lawrence

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SACRAMENTO – Assembly Republicans proposed legislation Wednesday that they said would streamline public works projects, but Democrats quickly criticized the bills as unnecessary obstacles to a series of bond measures being debated in the Legislature.



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The infighting raised doubts about whether lawmakers can agree this year on a major spending package to build and strengthen highways, levees, dams, schools, prisons and government buildings. Passing such a program is the centerpiece of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's re-election year policy goals.

Assemblyman Roger Niello, R-Fair Oaks, explains his proposed legislation that would allow the Department of Transportation to use so-called design-build contracts, during a news conference held at the Capitol in Sacramento Wednesday.

The GOP legislation includes a bill by Assemblyman Roger Niello, R-Fair Oaks, that would allow the Department of Transportation to use so-called design-build contracts under which the same contractor would design and build a highway or rail project.

“It's a technique that's been proven to deliver projects faster and cheaper,” Niello said.

The package also includes bills that would remove restrictions on school districts hiring private companies to provide bus, maintenance and cafeteria services, allow flood-control projects that result in the loss of wildlife habitat and exempt levee maintenance projects from environmental review.

Republicans also are pushing constitutional amendments that would bar the state from using motor vehicle sales tax revenue for non-transportation programs and earmark a portion of the state's annual budget for public works projects.

Assembly Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Bakersfield, called the legislation “an infrastructure reform package that brings accountability to the plan (and) will help us build now, build more and pay less.”

But Democrats and a union representing state engineers questioned whether the legislation would save money.

Professional Engineers in California Government said the design-build bill could lead to a “highly subjective contract-selection procedure which results in favoritism, waste and delay.”

Steve Maviglio, a spokesman for Assembly Speaker Fabian Nunez, D-Los Angeles, said the pay-as-you-go constitutional amendment would force cuts in other programs and cost more than borrowing by selling state bonds to pay for public works projects.

He called the levee legislation an attempt to “rollback state environmental laws in the guise of flood protection.”

He also questioned why Republicans had included the school contracting bill in their proposals, saying it had nothing to do with the public works spending plan Schwarzenegger proposed during his State of the State address in January.

The GOP proposals, he said, could make it more difficult to reach agreement on a package of public works bonds to put on the ballot in June or November.

“If this is their starting point, we are a long way off,” Maviglio said. “If they're willing to be more realistic in their negotiations with something closer to where the governor and Democrats are, we will be able to get it done. They have to decide if they are going to be obstructionists or real players in this debate.”

Schwarzenegger has asked lawmakers to approve a \$222.6 billion public works spending plan that includes \$68 billion in bonds. The money would pay for a variety of projects, including highways, intercity rail, new schools, levee improvements, jails and prisons.

He wants the bond proposals to go before voters in a series of elections through 2014.

While they differ on some of the details, Schwarzenegger and the Legislature's Democratic leaders have said they want to work together to approve some type of public works plan this year.

It is Schwarzenegger's own party that has offered some of the stiffest resistance, with Republican leaders saying they are concerned about the amount of projected borrowing.

A spokesman for Schwarzenegger, H.D. Palmer, called the Assembly Republican proposals "another constructive chapter" in the debate over how to deal with the state's infrastructure problems.

He said Schwarzenegger agreed with several of the GOP proposals, including greater use of design-build contracts, saying they would "speed up construction and reduce costs."

Democrats are talking about approving a smaller package of bonds that would include money for housing, parks, schools, port improvements, highways, transit and to make hospitals safer during earthquakes.

Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata, D-Oakland, warned Monday that efforts to reach a compromise could fall apart if an agreement isn't reached in the next few weeks.