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With concerns regarding proposed toll hikes on bridges, SB-532 is put on hold

By Vera Kochan

Seven members of the House of Representatives, led by Mark DeSaulnier (D - Walnut Creek) and Anna G. Eshoo (D - Menlo Park), had written and signed an Aug. 4 letter to Gov. Gavin Newsom, State Senate and Assembly Leaders Toni Atkins and Robert Rivas (respectively), expressing their concern over SB-532 - a bill that, if passed, would have raised tolls on seven Bay Area bridges (operated by Bay Area Toll Authority) by \$1.50, resulting in drivers paying \$9.50 to cross one bridge as soon as 2024. This would not apply to the Golden Gate Bridge, which is operated and maintained by Golden Gate Bridge, Highway and Transportation District.

? SB-532 was written by State Senator Scott Wiener and Assembly Member Lori Wilson (D - Suisun City) with the intent of giving Bay Area transit agencies enough time to continue services while seeking a reliable source in the form a possible ballot measure.

? During an Aug. 22 interview on KTVU FOX 2 Weiner stated, "We had a lot of support in our Bay Area legislative delegations, but there was opposition, too. So ultimately, we ran out of time to try to build consensus, so we are going to work over the fall recess to try to build more consensus around a funding solution."

? If SB-532 had passed, Lamorinda residents who commute to work five days a week over bridges could have expected to pay approximately \$2,470 in annual toll fees. Hardest hit would have been low- and moderate-income residents who don't have the luxury of working from home.

? "Data from bridge toll transactions shows that 59% of toll payers on the Bay Area bridges come from just three East Bay counties: Alameda County (27.5%), Contra Costa County (19.7%) and Solano County (11.8%)," stated the letter. "On the San Francisco Oakland Bay Bridge alone, where over 31 million toll transactions occurred in one year, 52% of the toll payers came from Alameda County and Contra Costa County. Further, the percentage of bridge drivers originating from Contra Costa County, San Mateo County, and Santa Clara County has increased since 2015, and now accounts for almost 31% of toll transactions."

? The letter also acknowledged that COVID-19 had an adverse effect on transit systems to the point that financial sustainability took a hit, and ridership complaints pointed to lack of safety, security, reliability, and filthy conditions.

? The members of congress also felt that additional information was needed to warrant such a toll hike. They requested a cost-benefit analysis of the impact of the proposed increase in bridge tolls on the average daily driver of these affected Bay Area bridges, a plan for independent oversight of both the distribution of funds by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission to the Bay Area transit agencies and the usage of funds by Bay Area transit agencies, as well as an analysis of which transit agencies will receive support from these funds and their areas of service, compared to the drivers that pay the tolls. They also wanted to know the impact of this type of short-term funding source on finding sustainable long-term solutions, without substantial external aid/bailouts (including emergency federal aid), to support the operations of Bay Area transit agencies, and requested an impact analysis of low-income or car-dependent commuters.

? According to DeSaulnier's website, "The letter has received support from The Bay Area Council. `The Bay Area Council, which has led and supported numerous major investments in transportation over the generations strongly opposes SB-532,' said Jim Wunderman, Bay Area Council President and CEO. `Before yet again asking motorists to dig deep and pay more tolls, let's have a complete and honest review of our region's transit system, and ensure that we are delivering on reliability, efficiency, safety and connectivity among the 27 operating agencies. The public deserves nothing less.'"

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