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Group urges state to restore Prop. 42 road repair funds
By Sylvia Moore

A group of Ventura County elected officials and business leaders on Thursday urged state legislators to pass a revised state budget that restores gas tax funds to fix aging and dilapidated roads.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger included $1.3 billion in Proposition 42 funding in his revised budget released last month. In 2002, voters overwhelmingly approved Prop. 42, which dedicated sales tax revenue from gasoline sales to transportation improvements. But when the state faced a big deficit, Prop. 42 money was diverted to help balance the budget. Over the past three years, the state has diverted more than $5 billion in gas sales taxes to other uses.

The Ventura County leaders gathered at the Pierpont Inn in Ventura on Thursday to implore the state to keep its promise to restore the money.

"What we're here to say is how thrilled we are that the governor has decided to reinstate funding under Proposition 42," said Toni Young, a Port Hueneme councilwoman and regional council president of the Southern California Association of Governments. Young said the state's practice of raiding local government funds in times of emergency needs to stop.

"Let them fix their own problems," she said.

Simi Valley Councilman Glen Becerra said he and other association members are frequently traveling to Sacramento to put pressure on lawmakers to restore Prop. 42 money. John Procter, president of the Ventura County Transportation Commission, compared fixing the county's roads to performing triage. The longer projects are put on hold, he said, "it becomes more and more expensive to fix these things."

The officials said worsening gridlock and an increase in air pollution is hurting the quality of life in Ventura County. Dan Beal, managing director of public policy for the Automobile Club of Southern California, said county motorists spend on average more than $500 a year fixing vehicles banged up by poorly maintained roads.

Moorpark Councilman Keith Millhouse said county residents spend about 50 hours a year stuck in traffic, amounting to about $1,200 per person annually in lost productivity and wasted gas.

"Gridlock is killing the California economy, and somebody needs to do something about it," said Millhouse.

Zoe Taylor, executive director of the Ventura Chamber of Commerce, said more and more employees have to drive farther to get to work because they can't afford to live in Ventura County, increasing gridlock and affecting small businesses. County Supervisor Judy Mikels said slow traffic hurts local businesses that rely on roads to move their goods quickly to and from the Port of Hueneme. She said one local farmer is losing $40,000 a year because of gridlock.

"Extrapolate that to all the businesses in the county and that's an extraordinary economic impact," said Mikels.