

Fresno County looks for money in DC as budget cuts hit

By Michael Doyle, McClatchy Newspapers
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WASHINGTON -- Fresno County officials are lobbying Congress at an awkward time this week.

While the county has a wish list, the Congress has a budget problem. Several budget problems, actually, all of which complicate the county's efforts to fund priorities ranging from road improvements to high-speed rail training.

"It certainly makes it more challenging," Fresno County Board of Supervisors Chairman Henry R. Perea acknowledged Monday.

Perea is one of 22 politically attuned Fresno County residents swarming Capitol Hill this week as part of an annual lobbying trip dubbed "One Voice." This is the county's eighth annual lobbying trip coordinated under the "One Voice" umbrella by the Fresno Council of Governments, but the first to occur under such peculiar circumstances.

On Saturday, just as the Fresno delegation arrived, the federal government entered into the murky budget world known inside-the-Beltway as the "sequester." The automatic round of across-the-board budget cuts, imposed because Congress and the White House failed to strike a deal, will eventually reduce federal spending by \$85 billion through Oct. 1. Further clouding the picture, a temporary spending measure that keeps the federal government operating expires March 27.

Even if the temporary spending measure, called a "continuing resolution," is extended by lawmakers leery of paying the political price for a government shutdown, the dollar amounts will be tight.

"As dire as it is," Perea said, "there is still funding available."

Akin to similarly named ventures undertaken by other San Joaquin Valley counties, the "One Trip" delegation emphasizes a locally unified effort on behalf of a carefully pruned agenda.

This year, the delegation is focusing on nine current or proposed federal programs. They aren't earmarks, the individual projects that lawmakers once favored and that skeptics called pork. Led by House Republicans, Congress has sworn off earmarks for the time being.

Instead, for the most part, Fresno officials are backing larger programs for which potential local beneficiaries have been identified. By supporting continued State Transportation Improvement Program funding in the next federal transportation bill, for instance, officials hope dollars will trickle down to pay for work on a Veterans Boulevard and State Route 99 interchange.

In a similar vein, Fresno County Sheriff Margaret Mims is pushing for continued State Criminal Alien Assistance Program funding to help reimburse the county for the cost of jailing illegal immigrants locked up on other crimes. National program cuts have slashed the county's share, from \$1.3 million in 2008-2009, to \$468,000 last year.

"We hold a lot of inmates who are criminal aliens," Mims said.

As in past years, the Fresno County officials are proposing establishment of a new "[air and health quality empowerment zone](#)" to help fund San Joaquin Valley air pollution cleanup efforts. They are also asking for help in creating a "high-speed rail training facility" that would train workers, and for continued community development block grant funding.

"We understand there are no earmarks, but we want to be in position when they make allocations," Fresno County Supervisor Phil Larson said.

The Fresno County delegation includes a mix of public and private officials. The small city of Orange Cove, with a population of about 9,000, sent three representatives, more than any other town in the county. Mayor Gabriel Jimenez and Mayor Pro Tem Victor Lopez, who have feuded sharply in the past, are part of the "One Voice" contingent, along with Mario Villarreal, police commissioner with the Orange Cove Police Protection District.

Accompanied by lobbyist Len Simon, whose firm has been separately retained both by the city of Fresno and the Fresno Council of Governments, the county officials set up shop Monday on the fifth floor of a House office building to receive briefings. Other meetings are occurring elsewhere through Wednesday.

At last, a positive report for Fresno: Short commutes

By Kurtis Alexander, staff writer

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California's love affair with the car is alive and well.

One of every 10 state residents commutes at least an hour to work, according to new census reports, and some of the nation's top spots for mega-commuting -- traveling more than 90 minutes and 50 miles -- are in the Golden State: not surprisingly, the Bay Area and Los Angeles.

But not everywhere in California are long commutes a way of life, and Fresno residents should consider themselves lucky.

Fresno has the shortest average commute time of the state's 10 largest metro areas, a mere 21.7 minutes, according to census data.

As for the mega-commute, just 1.2% of people working in the Fresno area experience the 90-minute, 50-mile trudge, compared to nearly four times that in the San Francisco metro area, according to working papers released Tuesday by the U.S. Census Bureau.

"You want to get across town, it's 30 minutes tops, but that's probably because you stopped for a cup of coffee," said John Downs, transportation planning manager for the Fresno Council of Governments. "We don't have a lot of congestion here. If you want to get someplace and you have a car or access to a car, you can get there quickly."

The short commute times, Downs said, are the result of Fresno's auto-friendly grid of highways as well as the city's location -- far from the state's biggest urban centers, which tend to draw job-seekers from nearby communities.

Claim to the state's longest commute, according to the census, is held by the Inland Empire, where many residents travel to Los Angeles for work and the average commuter logs nearly 31 minutes of one-way travel.

The route holds the distinction of having the highest number of mega-commuters in the nation, according to the new census papers.

As a percentage of workers, the San Francisco and San Jose metro areas have California's most mega-commuters. They rank among the nation's top five for mega-commuting.

"There's an old saying among planners: You drive until you qualify. If you can't afford a house close to a job center, you move farther and farther away because you want that nice house," Downs said.

In Fresno, that's not so much an issue. Frensans don't have to travel far to their jobs. But they also don't make as much money, which means being OK with less income or relocating and dealing with the issues of a more congested locale.

"If I could double my salary by taking a job in San Francisco, am I willing to put up with a longer commute?" Downs said. "Where do people make the tradeoff? I don't know."

Californians, as a whole, seem more willing to land on the side of a longer commute.

The 10.1% of residents who travel more than 60 minutes to work ranks the state sixth in the nation for the most hour-long commutes. In New York, which tops the list, 16.2% of residents travel at least an hour to their job.

Nationwide commute time has generally risen over the past two decades, according to the census papers.

Fresno resident Kate Borders, who commutes from near Shaw and Marks avenues to downtown, appreciates that she can get to work in just 12 minutes.

"You can't really get any work done in the car," said Borders, a young mother of two. "I'm juggling all of the things that are going on in my life. Being in my car is the last thing I want to be doing."

Fresno's short commute has the downside of being heavily auto-oriented, which means, for example, [more air pollution](#) and problems for people who can't afford cars.

Just 1.3% of Fresno area residents use public transportation to get to work. About 77% drive alone.

Behind the numbers

* Most of the census data used for the commute estimates was collected over five-year periods -- between 2006 and 2010 or 2007 and 2011.

* When looking at mega-commuters, The Bee focused on the census list of where people work. For commute times, The Bee looked at where people lived.