Del Norte Triplicate

NEWS

Board of Supervisors Have No Questions Regarding AB 2059

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DEL NORTE COUNTY, CA (MPG) - At the Sept. 22, meeting of the Del Norte County Board of Supervisors, Assembly Bill 2059 appeared on the consent agenda — the portion of the meeting where multiple items can be approved together without the individual discussion normally associated with regular agenda business.

On the surface, AB 2059 sounds like something Del Norte County should welcome. The legislation, authored by Assemblymember Lori Wilson, attempts to address a very real problem facing rural California: transportation rules written with metropolitan communities in mind do not necessarily make sense in places like Del Norte County.

Under California's environmental review process, transportation projects can be evaluated according to Vehicle Miles Traveled, or VMT. But living in rural California means driving. We drive to work. We drive to medical appointments. We drive for groceries. Some residents travel hours for specialized medical care. Public transportation options simply aren't comparable to those available in Sacramento, S a n F r a n c i s c o o r Los Angeles.

AB 2059 recognizes that reality. Under the bill, a qualifying public transportation project would be presumed to have a less-than-significant transportation impact under the VMT standard when at least 70 percent of the project is located within designated nonmetropolitan counties. That could make it easier to move certain highway, bridge, road and other transportation projects forward. There is another important protection for rural communities. A project adding general-purpose lanes to the State Highway System must have a demonstrated safety or evacuation need to receive the presumption. Safety needs must be supported by collision, injury or fatality information or an appropriate safety analysis. And AB 2059 does not eliminate CEQA. Environmental impacts other than the VMT transportation measurement can still require review.

Those are significant arguments in the bill's favor. But there are questions on the other side that deserved discussion. The legislation creates a legal presumption based largely upon where a transportation project is located rather than requiring the same individualized VMT determination that might otherwise occur.

There is also the matter of money. The Del Norte County staff report lists financing as “N/A.” Yet AB 2059 itself states that the legislation imposes additional duties on lead agencies and therefore constitutes a state-mandated local program. The legislation then says the state does not have to reimburse local agencies

because they have authority to levy service charges, fees or assessments sufficient to pay for the mandated program. Does that mean additional

costs for Del Norte County? Maybe, maybe not. But isn't that something worth asking before sending Sacramento a letter of support?

Perhaps the most important local question is even simpler: Which Del Norte County transportation projects will actually benefit from AB 2059, and how much money or time will taxpayers save? The staff report doesn't provide those numbers. AB 2059 may ultimately prove helpful to rural counties. In fact, the final legislation passed both houses of the Legislature without a dissenting vote. But good legislation should survive good questions. And an issue affecting future transportation projects, environmental review and potentially public money deserved more than becoming just another item buried on a consent agenda on Sept. 22.

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