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California Lawmakers Propose Bills Targeting Transportation, Clean Energy and Public Access



California lawmakers have introduced a series of bills aimed at address transportation infrastructure, air quality in schools, public transit adorability and clean energy.

The proposal would direct millions of dollars towards local governments, schools, and public transportation agencies while giving states agencies responsibility for distributing funds, and overseeing implementation.

The four measures - SB-31, SB-35, SB-51, and SB-64 - take different approaches to improving transportation and public services. while some bills established specific funding amounts, others leave funding decision to the annual state budget.

The proposals also raise questions about how limited state funding would be distributed, which communities would receive assistance and how lawmakers would determine whether the programs are successful.

By Amy Diaz



Southern California Games Transportation Investment Act

Bill SB-31, introduced by Senator Lola Smallwood-Cuevas, D-28, would create the Southern California Event Transportation Investment Act.

This program would provide grants to cities, counties, regional transportation planning agencies, transit agencies and other local transportation organizations in Southern California.

The funding could be used for public transportation, pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, road and street safety, disability accessibility, etc.

The bill would provide $3 million from the state's General Fund. Individual grants would be limited to $150,000 unless the program determines that a larger grant is necessary for a regionally significant project. At least 30% of the funding would be required to benefit disadvantaged or historically underserved communities.

Smallwood-Cuevas states funding amounts reflect the state's budget. Since the state budget has changed to a lower amount than the previous budget, it limits how much lawmakers can dedicate to a single proposal.

The $150,000 grant limit was also reduced from an earlier proposal because of the smaller budget. “As it stands, the grants would be best suited to small-scale local improvements, like filling potholes in especially poor-condition roads and installing new fare gates at select transit stations,” Smallwood-Cuevas said.

I asked Smallwood-Cuevas how it would be determined which areas the program would run in. She said CalSTA has questions to determine those things. Reporting requirements would allow lawmakers to examine how the program is implemented and how much funding reaches those communities.

One issue that was acknowledged is that the legislation does not have a specific method for showing the long-term benefits of this program; this is her response, “I appreciate the input as there absolutely should be a written definition of what constitutes a long-term benefit. I strongly support this and will amend the bill as soon as possible.”

According to Smallwood-Cuevas, she has received favorable feedback from several lawmakers, including Senators Ben Allen, Laura Richardson, Henry Stern, Susan Rubio and Bob Archuleta.

If the number of projects meeting eligibility requirements exceeds the amount of funding provided under Bill SB-31, Smallwood-Cuevas said she will seek additional funding for Bill SB-31 in the future, especially if local projects illustrate a need for state support.

K-12 Smoke Preparedness Act

Senator Sasha Renee Perez, D-25, has proposed a three-year program through SB-35, the K-12 Smoke Preparedness Act, which will assist California public schools in preparing for smoke and poor indoor air quality.



Through the act, grant money will be distributed to 50 public schools during the 2027-28 through 2029-30 school years. The grant money may be used to purchase portable HEPA air cleaners, replace filters, and train school personnel. Public schools with high levels of smoke exposure, inadequate filtration systems, and low financial capacity will have priority when selecting schools for this program.

K-12 Smoke Preparedness Act:
Continued

A one time allocation of $5 million will be provided through the General Fund for the pilot program. Funds not utilized within the pilot program will be returned to the General Fund. Senator Perez stated that the $5 million was estimated based on an average of approximately 30 classrooms per participating school. Participating schools may not exceed $100,000 in total funding throughout the life of the program. Funding for the program is designed to cover portable HEPA air cleaners and replacement filters.

Although numerous public schools may experience smoke exposure, this bill limits the number of participating schools to 50. Senator Perez stated, "I want to follow up on how the $5 million is spent by the pilot program so that I can later provide taxpayers with all of the data collected regarding their hard-earned dollars." Participating public schools will retain the purchased equipment following completion of the pilot program. A final report will be submitted to the Legislature on January 1, 2031. This report will detail the overall costs associated with the program, problems encountered by participating public schools, outcomes, and possible options for continuation/expansion.

Additionally, the report will help establish the long-term expense of maintaining and replacing equipment. In the event that the pilot program demonstrates a considerable improvement in indoor air quality, Senator Perez indicated that she would support subsequent legislation to assist public schools with purchasing replacement filters and maintaining equipment after the program concludes.

Senator Perez stated that she does not currently know whether other legislators plan to endorse this bill but intends to solicit support since public schools across California may benefit from this initiative.

Clean and Affordable Transit Act

Senator Laura Richardson, D-35, has authored SB-51, which will create the Clean and Affordable Transit Program under the California Department of Transportation.

SB-51 provides financial assistance to local public transportation systems for various purposes, including providing discounted fares to low-income passengers, increasing the availability of transit services, and transitioning to more environmentally friendly transportation methods.

In particular, this bill focuses on communities that have either low income levels or high ridership rates for their transit systems, and areas where the provision of public transportation services is poor.



Transit systems that receive funding under SB-51 are also obligated to allocate some portion of these funds toward purchasing cleaner or zero-emission transportation equipment and related infrastructure.

Transit systems located within communities that experience elevated levels of air pollution will be given preference when allocating funds. Unlike SB-31, SB-35, and SB-64, this bill does not specify a dollar value for the program.

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In addition to not specifying a dollar value for the program, SB-51 does not provide a single statewide income cutoff for defining what constitutes low income. According to Sen. Richardson, " There is no specific amount at this time. We would first need to see how many districts qualify and how much funding the state can provide".

Sen. Richardson also indicated that communities with low ridership due to a lack of sufficient transportation options should also be considered. As part of the program's overall goal of expanding access to public transportation, she stated that communities experiencing low ridership should be evaluated.

Although SB-51 mandates that transit agencies allocate a portion of their budgets toward cleaner transportation equipment, it does not specify a minimum percentage. Sen. Richardson stated that a percentage may be specified at a later date, enabling transit agencies to divide the remaining funds between reducing fares and expanding routes.

Evaluation of the program's success will occur using multiple metrics. These metrics include reduced fares, increased route availability, improved accessibility, and replacement of older buses with newer, cleaner versions.

Clean Transit Resilience Act

SB-64 The Clean Transit Resilience Act by Benjamin Allen would establish the Clean Transit Resilience Grant Program under Caltrans.



The program would allow transit agencies to apply for grants to install solar energy systems and/or battery storage at transit stations, maintenance facilities, or other transit properties.

The grant funds would be used to purchase and/or install the systems and connect them to existing infrastructure. In order to receive a grant, transit agencies must submit information detailing the proposed location of the project, the estimated total cost of the project, the estimated amount of money saved per year through reduced electricity bills due to the new system, and how the new system will help ensure that transit service continues during an electrical outage.

In considering whether to approve a grant application, Caltrans will look at both potential cost savings and the ability of the new system to provide reliable power during an emergency.

SB-64 would fund this program using $20 million from the General Fund. Once a grant has been awarded and installed, the recipient agency would be required to submit reports detailing the completion of the project and an estimate of the resulting energy and reliability benefits.

As written, SB-64 does not address how the state would determine which transit agencies would receive funding if more than $20 million worth of projects are submitted.

Additionally, SB-64 does not address who is responsible for maintaining or replacing the solar panels/batteries once the grant money runs out.

When reached for comment on SB-64's funding, implementation, and accountability, Sen. Allen did not respond prior to the deadline.

Different approaches, similar questions



The four proposals address different parts of California's transportation and public infrastructure needs. A major concern for all of these bills is that there may not be sufficient funding available to implement the programs outlined in the legislation. Each bill has a different level of funding proposed. SB-31 is proposed to receive $3 million; SB-35 is proposed to receive $5 million; SB-64 is proposed to receive $20 million. There is no specific funding level identified for SB-51.

In addition to differences in funding levels, the bills also vary in terms of accountability. Some of the bills require state agencies or grant recipients to submit reports regarding their use of funds and the outcomes associated with those funds. Other bills do not include reporting requirements and leave many issues such as funding amounts, eligibility criteria for funding, and long-term maintenance of funded projects to be addressed at a later date.

Ultimately, lawmakers' decisions regarding these bills will depend upon a number of factors, including the objectives of each bill, the ability of the state to adequately fund the implementation of the programs contained within the bills, and whether the state can provide adequate funding to sustain the programs. Community leaders throughout California will be interested in how the various proposals will affect their communities.

In addition to being concerned with how much funding each proposal will bring into their community, they will also be concerned with who will receive funding under the various proposals, how the programs will be implemented, and whether the investment will lead to long-lasting improvements in their communities