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Let voters decide in June

Jerry Brown, George Deukmejian, Pete Wilson and Gray Davis, guest columnists

Beginning in the 1960s, California's population explosion necessitated giving priority attention to growth in our schools, health and welfare caseloads and prisons. Now is the time to shift our attention to our state's most critical transportation and water supply infrastructure needs. They demand immediate attention. Inaction risks serious health hazards, job loss, and quite literally disaster to our state water supply.

But only three days remain in which to craft a statewide strategic infrastructure bond measure for the June ballot. As four former governors, we'd much rather stump for a ballot initiative now, than raise funds for disaster relief or the treatment of life-threatening diseases caused by harmful air pollution.

California's trade transportation infrastructure, notably the ports, freeways, railroads, and grade-crossings, need priority attention. The levees throughout Northern California must be strengthened to avoid the loss of life and property.

Our state has serious infrastructure deficiencies. Some which threaten a genuine crisis may be invisible to the voters. The urgency of strengthening our levees is a good example. It can be summed up in one place: New Orleans. But levee failure in California would mean the flooding and destruction of Northern

California neighborhoods and a disastrous loss of drinking water in Southern California for an estimated 18 months.

The swelling volume of export and import traffic moving through the state's ports and transportation corridors could well produce a different kind of potential environmental hazard.

Without public investment to provide the curative infrastructure improvements which can avoid it, the continued rapid growth could further clog our already congested rail and freeways. The resulting congestion would produce worsening diesel pollution threatening a serious toll on public health.

The state needs to put a catalytic converter on this vital but polluting economic engine. We must take drastic action to curtail harmful diesel emissions, starting with an outright ban on the older, dirtier 25 percent of unregulated diesel engines which account for 65 percent of truck particulate matter pollution.

We need a bond initiative now to pay for securing levees and funding public projects that will make needed trade and job growth attractive to the communities traversed and adversely impacted transportation corridors. We must eliminate at-grade rail crossings, and hasten the adoption of cleaner diesel engines to provide their neighborhoods relief and remedies from the trains and trucks moving goods through them. Then they will welcome the jobs they bring -- jobs which we will need to keep pace with California's historically relentless population growth. We strongly urge all policy makers in Sacramento to send an infrastructure bond measure to the voters in the June Primary Election to repair our levees and provide the needed transportation corridor improvements.

Whatever the partisan and philosophical differences that divide our officials our urgent infrastructure needs demand that they act now.

They have 72 hours to decide.

As former governors of California, Jerry Brown, George Deukmejian, Pete Wilson and Gray Davis have worked with the Los Angeles Economic Development Corporation to establish the Southern California Leadership Council and the Center of Economic Development. They support a "Green Freight Initiative" strategy that reduces environmental impacts and sustains job growth.