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Politicians dump costs onto home buyers

By: Michael D. Pattinson - Commentary

Sherlock Holmes once solved a mystery by explaining what did not happen. The dog did not bark.

The recently passed \$268 billion federal transportation bill provided some mystery for North County and Riverside County motorists that perhaps only Holmes could explain.

Why was there no money for the extension of Highway 76 from Oceanside to Interstate 15? Earlier this year county supervisors considered this road improvement so important that they imposed a \$900 million tax ---- they call them development fees ----Yon local home buyers and commercial developers that will lead to higher house prices and business rents.

In Riverside the mystery is even deeper. Two years ago, worried by growing traffic congestion, county supervisors threatened to stop all home building (and wreck the local economy) if builders did not agree to a multibillion-dollar tax ---- again they call it a fee ---- known as the Transportation Uniform Mitigation Fee.

Builders capitulated, and an \$8,000 tax is now added to all new homes in Riverside County, but there was no money in the transportation bill for TUMF. Despite collecting over \$170 million from TUMF, no new roads have been added, and county officials are unable to give dates for the opening of new roads funded from this tax. Despite this, county supervisors are already discussing a new TUMF fee to fund improvements to Interstate 215.

No one disputes that I-215, like a lot of Southern California freeways, needs widening, but why are home builders and their customers paying for this when federal dollars are available?

It is worth reminding ourselves that the money doled out by Congress belongs to us. We sent it to Washington in the first place, and we are getting a poor return, with only 92 cents of every gas tax dollar sent from California returning to our state. Perhaps that is why four of the 10 most-congested U.S. cities are in California.

Worse, most of our gas tax money that is returned is not spent on roads or freeways but on mass transit projects that few people who actually pay gas taxes will ever use.

The Oceanside-to-Escondido Sprinter received funding in this bill, as did a tunnel that is planned to run under Coronado. There was even money to landscape the Ronald Reagan freeway in Simi Valley. Does anyone believe President Reagan would want "his" freeway landscaped while Southern California freeways are left in gridlock?

Ironically, the largest amount of California freeway and road construction funding ---- \$630 million ---- went to the agricultural community of Bakersfield, a city not known for its gridlock. Rep. Bill Thomas, who represents this constituency, also chairs the committee that allocates funding.

Who can blame him for doing his job? Bakersfield home buyers are certainly more fortunate than those in North County and Riverside County, who are now the preferred funding source of all forms of infrastructure.

That is why we don't have enough of it.

New home buyers are an easy target. They do not become political constituents until developments are complete. They are the dogs that do not bark.

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