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State Senate hearing tackles Peninsula growth problems

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The Peninsula could be headed for environmental and traffic nightmares unless it gets better public transit and more housing, experts testified Thursday at a special state Senate hearing in Redwood City.

Sky-high housing prices are already forcing workers to commute from faraway places like Tracy, clogging freeways and polluting the air. Now, an impending boom in the biotech industry is poised to bring thousands of new jobs to the Highway 101 corridor.

"The industry is just about to explode in growth," said Matthew Gardner of BayBio, a biotech trade association.

The hearing brought business leaders such as Gardner together with local officials and environmental advocates to talk to members of a committee on Bay Area sustainable development. State Sen. Leland Yee, D-San Francisco/San Mateo, formed the ad hoc committee to see what the state could do to help manage the region's growth.

Yee and fellow Sen. Tom Torlakson, D-Antioch, heard from all quarters in a three-hour session that hammered home the Peninsula's widening imbalance between jobs and housing.

Yee said he was impressed by the willingness of Gardner and others in the private sector to take responsibility for their contributions to the problem. He said state money will likely be needed as well for the area to keep growing without becoming choked with congestion and smog.

Leaders at the hearing were full of ideas for putting such money to use.

Caltrain called for help with its electrification program. BART and local bus agencies want a new funding stream to improve their fleets. City and county officials suggested incentives for transit-oriented development.

A pile of state money has already been earmarked for transportation issues, Yee noted. Proposition 1B, passed by California voters last fall, brought in \$40 billion that will be divvied up in the years to come.

"Forty billion dollars is a lot of money, but it's not nearly enough," said Henry Gardner, executive director of the Association of Bay Area Governments. "You could spend it all just in Los Angeles."

The important thing, Henry Gardner said, is to use the resources that are already available as efficiently as possible. Encouraging housing developments near train stations, he said, is a big step that cities can take without shelling out cash.

San Mateo County Supervisor Adrienne Tissier said she was excited about Proposition 1B's passage but disheartened that state leaders then used it as an excuse to cut millions intended for public transit from this year's budget.

She'd like to see an express "baby bullet" bus line that connects employment centers such as South San Francisco to the South Bay. But agencies such as SamTrans and the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority struggle every year just to balance the books.

Since the bond money is a short-term fix, Yee said he and his colleagues will look for new sources of reliable revenue for transit projects. One idea, he said, is collecting some sort of fee from Peninsula employers for the traffic impacts of the jobs they create.

Several witnesses suggested congestion pricing, or charging drivers to use certain roads or lanes, as a way to cut pollution while raising funds for transit.

Torlakson floated the oft-discussed idea of a carbon fee on cars or other contributors to pollution. Asked if such a solution is realistic politically, he said, "The magnitude of the problem is enormous. We have to think outside the box."