

Legislature delays water bond to 2012 ballot

Wyatt Buchanan, San Francisco Chronicle, 8-10-10

SACRAMENTO -- The California Legislature voted Monday night to pull the \$11 billion water bond from November's ballot and delay it for two years, a move that came as backers of the proposal became increasingly concerned about its prospects at the polls.

The full Senate approved the delay of Prop. 18 by a 27-7 vote, barely reaching the necessary two-thirds majority of the 40-member Senate. Late Monday night, the Assembly also passed it by the slimmest of margins in that 80-person house, with a 54-22 vote.

Some lawmakers from both parties have called for the bond to be scrapped and rewritten.

Sen. Dave Cogdill, R-Modesto, the author of the original bond measure passed by the Legislature in November as part of a comprehensive package of water legislation, was not happy about the delay but said that it is necessary to ensure passage by voters. He noted the difficulty of getting it passed in the first place and said he does not believe that a better alternative exists.

"Much like Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny, I'm afraid this utopian plan does not exist," Cogdill said. "Let's not let the perfect be the enemy of the good."

The proposition, known as the Safe, Clean and Reliable Drinking Water Supply Act, funds a wide array of projects across the state, including \$3 billion for storage projects like reservoirs, for groundwater cleanup, drought relief and for restoration of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

It has come under increasing criticism because of its cost, the inclusion of nearly \$2 billion in earmarks that opponents call pork, and a provision that would allow private corporations to own and operate taxpayer-built reservoirs and other water-storage projects.

The bill to suspend the timing of the bond also removes that provision.

Assemblywoman Anna Caballero, D-Salinas, said lawmakers could use the next two years to convince voters the bond is necessary.

"I do believe that the best chance of success is in 2012," she said.

Opponents were not moved, however, and argued that the bond should be stripped of all but essential needs for California's water. Voters in the state have approved more than \$20 billion in state water bonds since 1996, more than \$3 billion of which has never been spent. About \$1 billion of that unspent money was intended for projects in line to get even more money from the upcoming bond measure.

Sen. Lois Wolk, D-Davis, has been one of the most outspoken opponents of the bond and was the sole lawmaker to vote against the delay at the Senate Natural Resources and Water Committee hearing earlier in the day.

She said the focus of the bond should be lessening the state's reliance on the delta as the hub of its water system and that there are projects funded by the bond that are popular but not critical.

"We can't afford it. It's fiscally irresponsible to move" the bond to 2012, Wolk said, noting that money would go toward building water education centers even as public schools were closing.

Assemblyman Bill Berryhill, R-Ceres (Stanislaus County), said the lawmakers needed to "put it on a diet" before the bond goes before voters.

Prop. 18 would be repaid with money from the state's general fund, which has a \$19 billion deficit and is projected to continue to have a significant deficit for the foreseeable future absent any major action by the Legislature and governor.

If fully spent sometime after 2015, the bond would cost the general fund \$765 million a year until it is paid off around 2050, according to the Legislative Analyst's Office.

With interest payments, the bond ultimately will cost taxpayers about \$22 billion.

Lawmakers were under pressure to pass the changes before a Monday night deadline for the secretary of state to submit the voter information guide to the printers. If the bond were to be changed and remain on the ballot, the secretary of state would have to issue a supplemental guide, which could cost taxpayers as much as \$4 million.