Jerry Hill seeks more cap and trade funds for transit: Caltrain’s plans for electrification could benefit from senator’s proposal

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Caltrain’s efforts to accommodate growing ridership could receive a much needed boost in funding as state Sen. Jerry Hill proposed legislation Thursday calling for a redistribution of cap and trade funds.

Hill, D-San Mateo, is seeking to increase funding from the state’s greenhouse gas reduction laws by allocating an additional $300 million a year to transit-related projects.

“There’s such a direct connection between cap and trade and the nexus between the creation of carbon and automobile traffic, with 40 percent of carbons coming from automobile traffic and transportation. So if we can take more vehicles off the road, we can solve this problem a lot easier and a lot better,” Hill said. “It’s important that every mechanism and tool be used and maximized to get people out of their cars and to use mass public transit.”

Hill introduced Senate Bill 8-X1 Thursday calling for the state to double cap and trade funding from 10 percent to 20 percent toward Transit and Intercity Rail Program and increase spending on the Low-Carbon Transit Operations Program from 5 percent to 10 percent.

While the governor’s proposed budget estimated the state would receive about $2 billion in revenue from cap and trade auctions this fiscal year, these transit programs are currently slated to only receive about $300 million. Hill now seeks to increase that to $600 million to support programs that will have a direct benefit on reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

There’s a significant shortfall in funding to maintain mass transit as well as state roads and highways. With the population in the Bay Area continuing to rise, Caltrain is planning a massive system upgrade to account for growing ridership.

Caltrain’s Modernization Program entails electrifying the tracks, purchasing new trains and installing a new control system.

Electrifying the tracks between San Jose and San Francisco is anticipated to have substantial environmental benefit by reducing nearly 176,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide and decreasing 619,000 vehicle miles traveled each year, according to Hill’s office.

“We need a considerable amount of money for Caltrain’s modernization,” Hill said. “When you look at what that modernization program will give us in terms of congestion relief, it’s imperative that we allocate as much money as possible to Caltrain and other regional transit programs around the state that can get that same bang for the buck.”

There are significant local benefits to electrifying the tracks by 2020 — the same year in which cap and trade laws set statewide carbon emission reduction goals — such as alleviating congestion on Highway...
101, reducing greenhouse gases and enhancing mobility in general, according to Caltrain spokeswoman Tasha Bartholomew.

“The cap and trade programs are important for transit agencies, but the programs are small and there is not enough money in them,” Bartholomew wrote in an email. “We hope that these programs will grow and we support Senator Hill’s effort to increase them.”

Last fiscal year, Caltrain received $935,000 from cap and trade funds toward its more than $1.5 billion Modernization Program; however, it is still slated to receive nearly $750 million from the high-speed rail project — which is allocated 25 percent of cap and trade revenue.

Hill’s proposal would maintain the current percentage of cap and trade allocations to other programs such as high-speed rail and another 20 percent set aside for housing and sustainable communities; but it would decrease the remainder for the Legislature to spend at its discretion from 40 percent to 25 percent.

Hill’s bill is in response to the state’s post-fiscal year budget process in which Gov. Jerry Brown called for two special sessions to address transportation and health care — issues legislators stalled on during the normal budgetary session.

Now, the Senate’s Transportation and Infrastructure Development Committee is expected to review Hill’s proposal as part of the Extraordinary Session on Infrastructure, according to Hill’s Office.

With cap and trade now only in its second year, Hill said its important to ensure the law is implemented correctly by making adjustments as necessary.

“The goal is to fine-tune the allocations to meet the needs, the real needs of California,” Hill said. “Everyone wants a claim to the money and we have to find the best use and certainly regional public mass transportation is the best and most successful at reducing greenhouse gas emissions.”