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Editorial: Port-barrel spending

Voters alone shouldn't pay for port cleanup

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California's ports in Los Angeles and Long Beach are a maritime marvel. Visitors can't help being awestruck that 40 percent of the nation's total cargo is shipped through these ports every year.

These ports generate tens of thousands of jobs and provide much of the electronics, textiles, lumber and raw materials that fuel the nation's economy. But they also have a dangerous downside. They are sickening their neighbors. Thousands of ships, trucks and diesel-powered forklifts at these ports generate one-fifth of the particulate pollution on the South Coast linked to asthma and other diseases. Truck traffic has clogged nearby roads and highways, angering residents, who rightly believe that international corporations are getting rich off the ports while dumping the costs on California residents.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger had a chance this year to strike a more equitable bargain with the big shippers and truckers, but he failed to deliver. Sen. Alan Lowenthal, a Democrat from Long Beach, helped push Senate Bill 927 through the Legislature. The bill would have set a \$30 fee on every container that passes through these two ports to pay for port security, air pollution programs and transportation improvements. Right before the bill-signing deadline, Schwarzenegger vetoed the legislation, saying it didn't properly specify how the money would be spent.

That's a fine excuse, but Schwarzenegger had all session to ensure that any fee passed by the Legislature was properly earmarked. That he failed to shape such legislation suggests he succumbed to intense lobbying by shippers and other businesses who aren't paying their fair share. Said Long Beach Mayor Bob Foster: "Our kids are getting asthma so someone in Nebraska can get a cheaper TV."

In defending his veto, the governor says he is moving forward with a multitrack strategy for all ports, not just Long Beach and Los Angeles. The linchpin of this program is Measure 1B on the November ballot, a \$19.9 billion measure that has \$1 billion in taxpayer-financed bonds to reduce air pollution at the ports and \$2 billion to improve goods movement.

The governor's aides are enmeshed in negotiations with shippers and other industries on transportation partnerships that, they say, will add private money to this investment. A strategic plan is promised by year's end. Meanwhile, the California Air Resources Board is working on regulations that could prompt various industries to spend \$6 billion to \$10 billion to reduce pollution at the ports.

This all sounds pretty rosy, but the sequence of events should give voters some pause. The governor wants taxpayers to front several billion dollars in public money to help fix port problems caused by private businesses. Voters are urged to do this on the vague hope that multinational corporations will later invest a similar or greater amount and not try to kill state regulations designed to protect public health.

In essence, voters are being urged to approve a faith-based bargain on the ports. This is unacceptable. If the governor wants Californians to invest in these ports, he and his industry "partners" need to show some of their hand, and publicly commit to significant private spending on the ports before Nov. 7.

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