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Jerry Brown says he'd support delaying water bond

Marisa Lagos, Wyatt Buchanan, Chronicle Staff Writers

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Irvine --

Gov. Jerry Brown indicated Thursday that he would support delaying an \$11 billion water bond currently on the November ballot, saying a massive overhaul of the state's water system can begin without voters approving huge borrowing this year.

Postponing the bond measure - which has already been pushed back once - could give Brown's five-year, \$35 billion tax increase a better chance of passing in November. Brown made the comments on a two-day tour of Southern California, where he appeared before civic leaders in Los Angeles, Orange and San Diego counties to tout his budget proposal, tax plan and stress the state's strengths.

Speaking after a meeting with the Orange County Business Council on Thursday morning, the governor said the statewide general obligation water bond is not immediately necessary because ratepayers in several water districts would foot the bill for a conveyance project - like a pipeline or canal - to move water through or around the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

"My time frame does not require that that be done in November. ... I don't want to make that kind of decision sitting here in Orange County. But we definitely have to take a look at that project and make sure it really fits with what's absolutely needed," Brown said.

Plan ready by summer

Such a project could take the form of massive tunnels under the delta that would bring water to pumps that feed Southern California and parts of the Bay Area. Brown said an initial plan for what the project would look like would be completed by summer.

"Our obstacle is not the big water bond there. It's the environmental impact report and the state and federal permits, that's what we've got to do," he said. "Then at some point, we've got to have the money for the habitat restoration, but these are 50-year programs, and I think that bond issue is one I'm going to take a look at."

Brown mentioned delta habitat restoration and water storage as key parts of the statewide bond, though they make up just \$5.2 billion of the \$11 billion bond. The governor and leaders in the Legislature have said they want to revisit the size of the bond, and lawmakers also have raised the possibility of a delay.

When the bond was first approved by the Legislature in 2009 for the November 2010 ballot, leaders stressed the urgency of fixing California's aging water infrastructure and reversing the quick decline of the delta habitat.

Cynthia Koehler, California water legislative director for the Environmental Defense Fund, said she is not concerned that the massive construction project would happen without a major effort to restore the delta's ecosystem and said she doesn't doubt Brown's commitment to that.

Besides, she said, "The law requires a deal where these things are going forward hand in hand." The organization has a neutral position on the bond measure.

Brown also spent time this week defending the goals of his budget, saying proposed cuts to welfare and medical services for the poor and increased taxes do not conflict with his commitment to building a \$100 billion high-speed-rail project and pursuing those major upgrades to the state's water system.

"For some, chewing gum and jumping rope is daunting, but I think we can handle both. We have to invest, and we have to cut. We have to cut operating costs while we build the foundations of an abundant future," he said.

On the road

Brown had barely wrapped up his State of the State speech Wednesday in Sacramento when he hit the road to Southern California, a population-rich - and politically crucial- region the governor will need in order to pass his tax plan this fall.

Over two days, Brown met with Burbank educators to get their ideas on reform; received a warm welcome from city and community leaders at Los Angeles City Hall; and attempted to sell business and community leaders on his budget plan - which relies on a temporary tax increase - in the Republican strongholds of Orange and San Diego counties.

Teachers and school administrators at Bret Harte Elementary School in Burbank spent nearly two hours separately chatting with Brown about their challenges and needs, and emerged impressed with the governor's candor and openness. Brown proposed vague education reforms in his speech Wednesday, calling for reducing the number of tests students must take and concentrating more power at the local, not state, level, and said he was in Burbank not to speak to educators, but hear from them.

"We talked to him about the lack of resources, that we have too many kids in our classrooms - I think he understood our frustration," said Lisa Crystal, a kindergarten teacher at Bret Harte who has been a teacher for 13 years. "We spend so many hours preparing to take tests. He seemed like he definitely listened to what our needs are."

In Orange County, business leaders indicated they would be open to supporting the governor's tax plan - particularly because it would earmark billions of dollars for education, and would not raise taxes above what most people were paying in 2010.

E-mail the writers at mlagos@sfchronicle.com and wbuchanan@sfchronicle.com.

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