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Local roads may fall by wayside as state deficit deepens

By KELLY O'CONNOR

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SANTA CRUZ -- Potholes will turn to sinkholes, cracks will turn to crevasses and road emergencies will be put on the back burner if local agencies lose gas tax revenue.

That's according to county public works officials who fear the governor's proposal to direct gas tax revenue away from infrastructure projects to fill the state's gaping \$24 billion deficit.

The plan would eliminate \$4.6 million from the county government. Cities in the county also would lose cash under the plan. The gas tax is 18 cents per gallon and roughly 6.5 cents of that is split evenly between cities and counties.

"We are so dependent on this," said John Presleigh, county Public Works director. "This would basically shut us down."

The Public Works Department patches potholes and paves roads and responds to emergency road situations.

"We are on the final leg of repairs of the 2006 storm damage restoration," Presleigh said. "There was about \$20 million worth of damages out there and with a small staff, it takes longer

to clean up."

In the past two years, Public Works reduced staff from 78 to 58 workers, who cover 600 miles of county roads, Presleigh said. If the money is cut, at least 15 more county workers will be laid off immediately, he said.

"It's the anti-stimulus package" said Mark Dettle, Public Works director for the city of Santa Cruz. "Everything the federal government is trying to do to help, the state is undoing by cutting jobs, services and projects."

Loss of state funds would make the county ineligible federal matching funds, a loss Presleigh estimates equals about \$2.6 million.

The state's budget problems could lead to the closure of state parks and cuts to health care benefits among a host of other spending reductions.

"The state's avoiding the problems by pushing it onto the cities," Dettle said. "If the governor wanted to lead us out of this financial mess, he would raise the gas tax 5 cents a month for the next year."

Up to \$750 million of gas tax revenue could be diverted as early as this summer, according to the Legislative Analyst's Office.

The California State Association of Counties is considering a recommendation to increase the tax by 5 cents as an alternative to the state's proposal. The tax can be increased with a two-

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