

Governor hopes to emulate Pat Brown

By Peter Hecht -- Bee Capitol Bureau

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At his inaugural in 1959, Gov. Edmund G. "Pat" Brown promised a stewardship of "responsible liberalism" to build the California of the future. At the time, it seemed like brazen posturing.

California was going broke. In the three years before Brown took office, the state spent \$323 million more than it took in. With the 1958-59 budget deficit hitting a then-outlandish \$150 million, the new Democratic governor seemingly had no money to spend.

But Brown, the Golden State's 32nd governor, would leave a legacy of expansive infrastructure construction, including a legendary aqueduct, new universities and freeways that paved the way for the modern California.

Now California's 38th governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, a Republican rebounding after his political reform initiatives were resoundingly defeated in the November special election, is moving to reinvent himself this year with proposals he hopes will evoke comparisons to the Brown-era boom.

In the State of the State address tonight, Schwarzenegger is expected to endorse plans for bond programs or other methods to pay for tens of billions of dollars of infrastructure improvements, including schools, flood control, highways and other needs.

For a politically weakened governor, it may be a necessary move, said Jaime Regalado, executive director of the Edmund G. "Pat" Brown Institute of Public Affairs at California State University, Los Angeles. "The more he can appeal to Democratic or bipartisan issues such as infrastructure, the better off Arnold will be," Regalado said.

But Regalado said Brown "was the right guy at the right time" to direct a public works boom for California. Now, he said: "It's much more difficult. The deficit is larger. It is a much more complex state. The needs are more vast. ... The infrastructure hasn't kept up with growth. Not only do you need to build and expand that infrastructure, but you also need to repair what exists."

Yet Schwarzenegger has often vowed to emulate Brown and others whom he credits for building California's long-term vision.

"Californians can't get from place to place on little fairy wings," Schwarzenegger said in his State of the State last year. "... Like Gov. Pat Brown before me, I intend to see that the government builds the roads that Californians need."

And in a Nov. 30 speech to county government officials, Schwarzenegger pledged to build roads, schools and ports and "deliver energy, water and all the resources we need" for a population expected to grow by 5 million people in 10 years.

"Let's work together to achieve the same vision for California that (Govs.) Earl Warren, Pat Brown and Ronald Reagan saw: A California built for the future ... that remains the great engine of progress," he said.

H.D. Palmer, Schwarzenegger's deputy director of the state Department of Finance, said: "This is a governor who thinks big and is looking beyond the short-term."

"He is looking at the population we're going to have five, 10, 15 years down the road. And he is recognizing that the current infrastructure in California is not going to be able to accommodate the growth we know is coming."

As governor from 1959 to 1967, Brown boldly championed a \$1.75 billion bond program - then equal to three-fourths of the entire state budget - for the California Water Project, which helped transform desert valleys into farmland and the arid coast into teeming population centers. He worked to build freeways now crisscrossing the state and pushed through a higher-education master plan, helping to spur continued growth of the University of California and California State University systems.

Now Schwarzenegger appears poised to borrow from a similar script at a time when big government endeavors are frequently viewed with scorn and few politicians boast of "liberalism," as Brown did, whether "responsible" or not.

"For a modern conservative Republican, nurtured in the post-Reagan conservative movement, it will be a fairly significant departure to start calling for major resources for the public sector," said Ethan Rarick, acting director of the Center on Politics at the University of California, Berkeley, and author of the biography, "California Rising, the Life and Times of Pat Brown."

Brown and lawmakers placed bond measures on the ballot to win voter support - and funding - for infrastructure projects. Meanwhile, he increased state revenues by raising taxes on upper-income residents and corporations, Rarick said.

Schwarzenegger, who has rejected raising taxes, is expected to propose varied bond programs, including some to be paid back by higher fees on businesses or individuals benefiting from the improvements.

The governor's embrace of policies of Pat Brown is drawing skepticism from the two leading Democratic contenders who hope to drive Schwarzenegger from office in the 2006 election.

"This is like the expropriation by right-wingers of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's legacy," said state Treasurer and gubernatorial candidate Phil Angelides. "It's the most cynical approach of staying afloat in a Democratic state."

Said fellow Democratic candidate and state Controller Steve Westly: "He (Schwarzenegger) spent the last year tilting far to the right. The next year he's tilting far to the left. Let's see what governor emerges on Thursday" in the State of the State.

Angelides recently cautioned that new infrastructure should be paid for in part by those who directly benefit from the projects. And Westly proposed creating an oversight commission to ensure money from a bond program approved by voters is wisely spent so that "an infrastructure bond is a boon, not a boondoggle."

Schwarzenegger's pitch for infrastructure improvements comes amid an improving economy, yet less than two years after he persuaded voters to pass Propositions 57 and 58 to help close a \$15 billion state budget gap.

However, even conservatives such as state Sen. Tom McClintock, R-Thousand Oaks, applaud the playbook of Pat Brown, who died at age 91 in 1996.

"The Pat Brown years are now looked upon with rightful nostalgia," McClintock wrote in a recent column.

In an interview, McClintock said Brown set a prudent example by pushing through capital improvement projects that endured for decades. He said later governors and lawmakers wasted bond money on day-to-day operating expenses and local improvements that yielded few statewide benefits and were often obsolete years before they were paid for.

"We need a Pat Brown-style commitment to public works," McClintock said. "We had Republicans and Democrats building phenomenal public works in the '40s and '50s and we had Democrats and Republicans in the '70s, '80s and '90s who squandered billions of dollars with nothing to show for it."

Pat Brown's son, Oakland Mayor and former Gov. Jerry Brown, said Schwarzenegger should lay out a "bold vision," including high-speed rail and other 21st-century projects, for California. But he said it won't be easy.

Brown, a candidate for state attorney general, recalls his father having to offer state senators judgeships and other perks to get them to put his California Water Project bond initiative before voters.

"And development was easier in those days because there was more open space," Brown said. "We have 25 million more people now. We're crowded. And you have to find ways to repay the bonds."

If Schwarzenegger pulls off a major state rebuilding program, Brown said, history will remember him kindly. But he still may not get re-elected.

"By the time my father got finished, he lost to Reagan by 19 points," Brown said. "The fact you do great things doesn't mean you're going to be appreciated, at least right away."

STATE OF THE STATE

Today's speech by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger will be broadcast live at 5 p.m.

Television: Channels 3, 10 and 13