

Brown makes case for tunnels project to business, civic leaders

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Calling it a “challenge we have to respond to,” Gov. Jerry Brown told hundreds of business owners and others Thursday that the state needs to push forward with his administration’s plans for two water diversion tunnels to protect its economy.

All that stands between the salt water of San Francisco Bay and the fresh water running through the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to tens of millions of users and farms to the south, Brown said, are an aging network of levees and berms that are “going to crash at some point” because of rising sea waters caused by climate change or an earthquake.

“It would be a bad day,” Brown told hundreds of business and civic leaders at the 90th annual Sacramento Host Breakfast. Highlighting Silicon Valley’s reliance on Delta water, “We’re not talking a few billion – we’re talking hundreds of billions of dollars of economic loss,” he said.

Acknowledging that some people in the audience likely oppose the tunnels project, Brown joked that it might come down to an issue of semantics. “Instead of a tunnel, we’re going to call it a pipe. That seems to be more popular,” he said to laughter.

Brown, though, suggested that critics ignored the fact that California wouldn’t be where it is today without extensive waterworks throughout its history. “Think of it as an insurance policy to continue the very sophisticated engineering that has characterized California,” Brown said of the diversion tunnels.

Brown got applause when he declared his determination to sign a “stable, careful, sustainable budget” that rebuffs demands from fellow Democrats and others to increase spending on health and welfare programs.

Lawmakers and advocates, he said, have presented him with many ways to raise spending on seemingly worthy programs.

“It’s very easy to say you want budget discipline, but in the hurly-burly of legislative engagement, when you say no, it’s always no to something good,” Brown said. “The trouble is, too many goods make a bad.”

“Remember, I love all those programs I veto,” he added, “because I don’t want to cut them back when we hit the next recession in two, three or four years.” The state’s shortfall could hit \$40 billion over three years if officials are not careful, he said.

Praising the economic contributions of his audience, Brown got laughs when he said his administration would continue to fight attempts to lure businesses away by “enemies, foreign and domestic,” a reference to states such as Texas and Florida whose leaders have made job-hunting jaunts to California.

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