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Proposed Contra Costa sales tax could raise nearly \$3 billion for transportation projects

By Erin Baldassari, ebaldassari@bayareanewsgroup.com, 05/05/2016

WALNUT CREEK -- There's something for everyone in the Contra Costa Transportation Authority's proposed half-cent sales tax, and no one is completely happy with the plan.

That's the mark of a good compromise, said Eric Zell, one of the consultants hired to help the transportation commission draft the plan.

"We're at the point where, and it seems like everyone says this about the process, when ... everyone is unhappy, you're getting closer," Zell said. "It's clear that what we're proposing has accomplished that."

The proposed tax could generate approximately \$2.9 billion for the county over the next 30 years. It's meant to augment funds already being collected under Measure J, a half-cent sales tax voters approved in 2004, bringing the total tax to a full cent.



The proposed sales tax hike will help fund local road repairs.
(Susan Tripp Pollard/Staff) (SUSAN TRIPP POLLARD)

Transportation expenditure plan chairman Don Tatzin said many of the capital projects approved as part of the Measure J funds have already been completed or are nearing completion, including the fourth bore of the Caldecott Tunnel, widening of Highway 4, and the BART extension into Antioch, among others. But residents continued to express the need for more investment in the county's transportation infrastructure, he said.

"It's a better BART, it's traffic smoothing on major corridors, it's fix-it-first on local roads, it's better access for pedestrians and bikes, it's better transit, it's stuff like that," Tatzin said. "So, we're in the midst of putting that plan together."

Under the current plan, which is subject to revision, the largest portion of the funds collected, roughly 23 percent, will be returned to cities and towns to shore up existing infrastructure and repair local roads. There is funding for specific projects, including improving traffic and expanding high capacity transit options on Interstate 80, Interstate 680, State Route 242, State Route 24, Vasco Road and the Byron Highway connector.

There is also funding set aside for pedestrian and bicycle projects, bus and non-rail transit, increasing BART's capacity through the purchase of more train cars, extending BART to Brentwood, ferry projects, transit options for seniors and people with disabilities, innovation and new technologies, and safe transportation for children.

While the commission spent much of its meeting Wednesday night hammering out the details of the plan, Tatzin said there are still some philosophical differences to be worked out. One of the sticking points is a sprawl mitigation requirement that builds off the county's existing growth-management program.

Environmental and transit advocacy organizations have argued for the inclusion of measures that limit urban growth, promote infill development and encourage density around public transit. But some city and elected officials say the efforts go too far in dictating local land-use decisions.

Under the plan, municipalities would be required to include provisions for protecting ridgelines, wildlife corridors and conservation areas. Cities and towns looking to expand their municipal boundaries would also be required to protect farmlands from development or, if there is development, to mitigate the loss of farmland by acquiring it in other locations.

Danville Town Manager Joe Calabrigo said that in theory, it makes sense to locate housing close to transit, but in practice, there are competing needs to add housing and new jobs to the region.

"We have a responsibility to make land available to produce certain amounts of housing within each of our communities," Calabrigo said. "That's easier to do in some places than others."

Stemming sprawl is the only way to effectively reduce traffic congestion, decrease the number of solo drivers, and limit greenhouse gas emissions, said Joel Devalcourt, a representative of the Greenbelt Alliance. The organization has joined with two dozen environmental, bicycle and smart growth groups to advocate for investment in transit-oriented development as part of the proposed sales tax, Devalcourt said.

"In Contra Costa, we're trying to fix an ailing system that if we don't fix, will bring the entire region to a standstill, to gridlock," Devalcourt said. "Contra Costa County is one of the fastest growing regions in the Bay Area, and we have to fix this stuff now."

The commission is expected to approve the final version of the plan at its May 18 meeting. The proposal will then be sent to every city and town within the county for approval. Per the transportation authority's bylaws, the measure must receive approval from a majority of the cities and towns, as well as the Board of Supervisors, before it can be put it on the November ballot.

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