

Alameda County commission proposes ballot measure to increase sales tax for transportation

By Denis Cuff
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Alameda County's transportation commission has proposed asking voters in November 2012 to double the county sales tax for transportation -- from a half cent to one cent.

The money would be used to fix potholes, build trails and boost public transit.

If the measure wins by the required two-thirds margin, Alameda would become only the second county in California to raise its transportation sales tax to a penny. Los Angeles County was the first.

Top managers at the Alameda County Transportation Commission said they propose to extend and increase the sales tax because stagnant or reduced funding has eroded road conditions and public transit services for years.

The measure would raise some \$7.7 billion in new funds over 30 years, including a proposal that has roiled debate about allocating \$400 million to partially fund a BART rail extension to Livermore.

"Our roads will deteriorate and our congestion will worsen if we don't act," said Tess Lengyel, a deputy director for policy for the commission.

The agency is overseen by a 22-member board of elected city, county and transit district board members.

"We also are planning improvements to serve a population expected to grow by 500,000 people," Lengyel said.

According to a poll done for the commission in early October, some 69 percent of Alameda County residents would support the tax measure.

Unless voters approved a ballot measure, the county's current half-cent

sales tax would expire in 2022.

The new ballot measure would make the sales tax permanent -- which may raise eyebrows among tax skeptics who favor end dates for tax increases.

To ensure public oversight, the transportation commission has proposed that county voters would get a ballot measure in 2042 on a list of projects to be funded after that date.

Public transit for the masses and paratransit for seniors and the disabled would get the largest share -- nearly \$4 billion or 44 percent -- of the increased tax money, according to a report by the commission.

Local roads and streets would receive 30 percent. Trails and other projects to improve pedestrian and bicycle transportation would get 5 percent.

Not everyone is happy with the proposed allocations.

A coalition of social justice and public transit advocates said the \$400 million for BART to Livermore would be better spent on restoring bus service.

"To ensure that B3 (the tax increase) is successful, it must equitably invest in sustaining our existing transportation system and not increase the share of tax dollars being funneled to costly, low-benefit expansion projects," the coalition said in a statement Thursday made to a transportation commission steering committee.

Signing the statement were Alameda County Supervisor Keith Carson, Emeryville Councilwoman Ruth Atkin, and representatives of Urban Habitat, the Greenbelt Alliance, TransForm and Alameda Transportation Advocates.

In sharp disagreement, dozens of Livermore residents packed the Thursday meeting in Oakland to speak out for the rail extension funds.

One county transportation commissioner -- Alameda County Supervisor Scott Haggerty of Dublin -- said he supported the funds for BART to Livermore to curb congestion along Interstate 580.

"It's been a long time coming," Haggerty said. "The residents of Livermore will not be ignored for another 20 years."

Some transit advocates also are upset the commission failed to propose a dedicated flow of several million dollars annually to finance free public transit passes for youths countywide.

"The free passes for youth are important to social justice and equity," said Lindsay Imai, Urban Habitat's justice program coordinator.

The commission instead has proposed letting transit agencies apply for money to test free youth passes from a \$210 million fund for innovative transit projects.

Art Dao, the county transportation commission's executive director, defended the proposed allocations as improving public transit to lure more commuters out of cars.

"It's a balanced plan," Dao said. "We have to take care of the transportation needs of all the people."

In its proposal, the transportation commission recommended allocating AC Transit more than \$1.1 billion of the county sales tax over 30 years for operations, maintenance and safety programs.