

Panel forms to oversee road tax

Tony Salierno selected to represent Visalia on Measure R committee.

By Tim Sheehan / The Fresno Bee 02/07/07

VISALIA — The long-range spending plan for a half-cent sales tax for road and transportation improvements in Tulare County not only includes several big-ticket construction projects in Visalia, but also will provide the city with money it can spend on its own for road work.

Measure R, approved by Tulare County voters in November, is expected to generate nearly \$22 million in extra sales taxes in its first year.

The new tax will begin in April, with the first checks from the state expected to land in county coffers by this summer.

One requirement of Measure R is a Citizens Oversight Committee, a board to ensure the tax money is used in accordance with the overall spending plan.

On Monday, the Visalia City Council tabbed Tony Salierno, chairman of Provident Mortgage Co., as the city's representative on the 16-member committee.

Salierno, 68, was selected from among six applicants. The Tulare County Association of Governments is expected to formally approve Salierno, and nominees from Tulare County's other cities, when its board meets next week.

By law, 35% of the extra income from Measure R is to be divided among Tulare County and its cities for local transportation work. As the county's most populous city, Visalia is in line to receive about \$1.6 million a year as its share. That amount could grow if tax revenues increase, or fall if the county sees an economic slump.

Andrew Benelli, Visalia's public works director, said he expects much of that money in the first few years will be used to help the city catch up on much-needed street maintenance.

"We've got a lot of general maintenance needs," Benelli said, citing asphalt overlays and other repairs that are overdue for some of the city's major thoroughfares. "We haven't been able to keep up with maintenance as we'd like to; this may help us get back up to even."

Benelli said he will likely present a specific program of road repairs and traffic signals for the next few years of Measure R money to the City Council this spring.

Throughout Tulare County, officials say there are 3,850 miles of roads in need of more than \$1.5 billion in improvements. Measure R, over its 30-year life, is expected to generate about \$652 million.

Ted Smalley, deputy executive director of the Tulare County Association of Governments, said the county may seek to issue bonds against its future revenue to accelerate work on major projects that will become more expensive the longer they wait.

Smalley added that state and federal transportation grants likely will augment the income from Measure R to complete the overall spending program.

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