

# Transportation tax on fast track

Tulare County officials try to work out details for November ballot measure.

By Sarah Jimenez  
The Fresno Bee

VISALIA — Tulare County government leaders agreed Monday that plans for a proposed half-cent transportation sales tax need to move forward quickly if the mea-

sure is to appear on the November ballot.

But there was disagreement over some details of the tax — specifically whether a joint powers authority, or JPA, should be created for them to funnel potential funds.

Many leaders said they were concerned there isn't enough time to build support for the tax.

The Tulare County Association of Governments, or TCAG, discussed the proposed tax during its regular meeting Monday and called

for a special meeting June 26 to finalize the proposed ballot initiative.

Projections show the tax would bring in about \$21 million a year for road repairs and improvements.

Supervisor Phil Cox, who also is the TCAG chairman, said the association is working with a tight dead-

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line, but consultants already are involved in campaign planning.

Cox said the proposed tax was a "weekly work in progress" and would continue to evolve in the next few weeks.

The expenditure plan and possible formation of a JPA are expected to be finalized Thursday during a committee meeting, he said.

A final decision on whether the association wants to move forward with a ballot initiative is needed at the July 17 meeting, Cox said.

Supervisor Connie Conway said she was under the impression the association didn't have several weeks to make a decision on the proposed measure.

Supervisor Steve Worthley echoed Conway's comments, adding there is a difference between a legal "drop dead date" and when campaigning efforts should begin.

"I think there is a real sense of urgency today," he said.

George Finney, the association's executive director, said he wasn't sure what the committee and staff could bring to association representatives earlier than the July 17 meeting.

The real concern is giving cities enough time to consider the expenditure plan and creation of a JPA before the association meets again, he said.

Cities must review and approve the JPA membership before it heads to the Tulare County Board of Supervisors for final approval.

But Worthley said discussion of a potential JPA is interfering with the actual issue of whether the association should move forward with a transportation tax.

"We don't have the money — cities and the county collectively — to deal with transportation issues. Here we have an opportunity to deal with it," he said.

Worthley said the association shouldn't "fool with a JPA" that could slow down the process. And the association is a JPA that could funnel the funds, he said.

But Cox said some smaller cities, along with the city of Visalia, favor a separate governing

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body to disburse the funds.

Bob Link, a Visalia City Council member, said aside from the JPA issue, he is concerned the proposed initiative is being rushed.

He said Visalia officials recently saw people turn down Measure M — a \$41 million school bond measure — because they didn't have enough information early in the campaign.

"My concern is you're looking at a time frame that is too short to get the information to the people," he said.

Last month, an opinion research firm presented a survey of 1,000 likely voters in Tulare County for the November election.

It showed 67% of those polled held favorable opinions of a proposed ballot measure that would increase the sales tax by a half-cent for road repairs and improvements.

The poll had a margin of error of 3 percentage points.

The tax would require a two-thirds majority because officials intend it to fund a single issue — transportation.

After the meeting, Cox said he believes there is a consensus among the cities that the tax is needed. Disagreement centers around the details of the tax, including a possible JPA and the expenditure plan.

"If we don't do this, these projects will never happen," he said.

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