

Silicon Valley: Half-cent transit tax going to voters

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SAN JOSE -- Santa Clara County voters will decide if patching and improving roads, bolstering bus service and bringing BART to Silicon Valley is worth a hit at the register, as officials on Thursday resoundingly approved putting a sales tax measure on the November ballot.

While saying it wasn't a perfect plan, members of the Valley Transportation Authority voted unanimously to bless a yearslong effort to garner billions of dollars for popular transportation projects through a half-cent sales tax.

"I think it's clear that there will be ongoing work," said board chair and county Supervisor Cindy Chavez, who added that she was heartened to see representatives from labor, business and social justice advocates united in support of the tax, although different aspects.



Voters will be asked to approve a transit tax to help fund bringing BART to San Jose. (staff archives)

"We all agree on two things," said Carl Guardino, CEO of the Silicon Valley Leadership Group, "There's not enough money, but we need to prioritize what we have."

The tax, which would generate more than \$6.3 billion over the next three decades, is the product of more than three years of discussions and outreach, and a survey released a few weeks ago found that 69 percent of voters would support it -- more than the required two-thirds.

Guardino said that was the largest margin of support they have seen in six surveys over the years.

"That's how important people think traffic relief is, and how visionary they think it is to invest in this plan," he said.

If approved by voters, the tax could take effect in April 2017 and bring the county's sales tax rate to 9.25 percent, just short of the 9.5 percent maximum allowed by the state. The last time voters approved a transportation tax was in 2008, when an eighth of a cent hike was levied for BART.

Advocates for affordable fares and additional bus stops spoke about the need for \$500 million earmarked in the plan for such purposes.

"This is a half-billion-dollar investment in our economy, our environment and equity," said Derecka Mehrens, director of Working Partnerships USA. She said that wages have not kept up with housing costs, exacerbating the need for efficient and cheap transit.

Omar Vasquez, a lead organizer for Latinos United for a New America, said his group supports the tax but wants to see more down the line for transit options in poorer communities, as well as bus passes for seniors and students.

"Zero percent of the people in my group take BART," he said. "It's not important for them. We want to see the tax approved, but want to see the services that are important for everyone else."

Guardino said the most universal problem are the potholes and rough roads that put wear and tear on vehicles and can cause mishaps for bicyclists and pedestrians.

"There's nothing more important to voters than this," he said. "It's always the number one priority in a state that has disinvested in transportation infrastructure."

County Supervisor Joe Simitian, who had expressed concerns that previous transportation taxes saw the lion's share of resultant funds go toward BART operations, said that he supported the plan as it was brought to board members Thursday because it "strikes a good balance between the initial two issues."

"That's the need to make sure that BART to Silicon Valley does not gobble up all the funding at the expense of others," he said, "and to assure folks who will not be served by the extension that the bulk of funds goes for meaningful congestion relief throughout the county."

The measure also has a provision that if the funding formula is rejiggered down the line, it would take a three-fourths supermajority of the board to do so. The board consists of 12 members, all elected officials: five from San Jose, two from Santa Clara County, and five more from other cities with Sunnyvale, Campbell, Santa Clara, Gilroy and Los Altos currently represented.

A late-breaking issue came to light recently when it was revealed that part of the land planned to be used for the Santa Clara BART station is in a longterm lease to Apple. That was something that caught city officials by surprise.

But Apple is a member of the Silicon Valley Leadership Group, and Guardino said he did not expect it to be a major hurdle.

"Both sides are highly motivated" to reach an agreement, he said, adding that an Apple representative voiced support for the tax Thursday night.

The money raised by the local tax is expected to generate millions more from federal and state governments. All told, more than 600 projects worth \$48 billion were submitted to the VTA for consideration before being winnowed down to those in the final cut.

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SALES TAX DOLLARS

Proposed projects for the \$6.3 billion in anticipated revenue include:

- BART to San Jose, \$1.5 billion.
- Street repairs, \$1.2 billion.
- Caltrain capacity improvements and grade separations, \$1 billion.
- County expressways, \$750 million.
- Interchanges, \$750 million.
- Transit operations for vulnerable and underserved populations, \$500 million.
- Highway 85 corridor express lanes, \$350 million.
- Bicycle and pedestrian improvements, \$250 million.