



Measure A Can Help You Get Your Frozen Food Home

By Andy Isaacson, Earthscope Reporter

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You may have to pay more for your groceries soon — but at least your ice cream won't melt on the drive home. On November 2, Marin voters will be asked to raise sales tax to fund local transportation projects. The vote for president may well be overshadowing local ballot measures this election year, yet high voter turnout is what backers of the Transportation Sales Tax Expenditure Plan — dubbed Measure A — are counting on to gain the two-thirds voter support needed to pass the measure.

The proposed tax hike would raise the Marin sales tax, currently the lowest in the Bay Area, from 7.25 percent to 7.5 percent — costing the average county resident an estimated \$80 a year.

The revenue for these taxes would fund a variety of specific transportation problems. The majority of funds would bail out the county's beleaguered public transit system, restoring service and adding buses with bike racks to encourage two-wheeled transport. Other funds would be used to maintain and improve local transportation infrastructure, including roads, bikeways and sidewalks; to improve safe school access and reduce school-related traffic congestion through a Safe Routes to Schools program, crossing guards, and bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure (21 percent of morning traffic is school-related); and to close the gap in the Highway 101 HOV lane from Terra Linda to Larkspur.

In a survey commissioned by the Marin Transportation Authority in March, voters ranked the snarling traffic on Highway 101 — the county's primary north-south artery — their highest transportation concern. Under the Measure A tax plan, however, the Highway 101 HOV "gap closure" project would receive the lowest allocation of tax funds — less than 8 percent.

The reason, insists Supervisor Cynthia Murray, is that's all that is needed to do the job. Over the past two decades, the county has been saving local gas taxes to pay for an expanded HOV lane, but the state backed off from pitching in funds due to its own fiscal crisis. Raising these taxes is essential to replace that missing revenue, otherwise the project may stagnate until 2015 as driver hypertension rises.

County officials contend that while imposing a sales tax alone will not solve all transportation problems, it will afford Marin status as a "self help" county, allowing it leverage for matching state and federal grants. Without a sales tax, Marin has lost millions of dollars to other counties that have secured revenue to match state funds.

In 1980, 1990 and again in 1998, Marin voters shot down similar transportation tax measures, but this time county officials have retooled the plan to achieve a consensus.

According to Supervisor Murray, the plan under Measure A is pared down to the "essential items needed to improve transportation," eliminating previously unpopular elements such as a rail line.

And while earlier ballot measures were advisory — meaning that they provided the Board of Supervisors with an indication of how voters might want tax proceeds to be spent, but not committing the board to allocate funds in any specific way — this year's Measure A specifically outlines where the funds will be spent.. A citizen oversight committee of 12 individuals, representing each of the five supervisory districts and social interests, will hold the Transportation Authority of Marin accountable, and the measure also requires annual independent audits.

Measure A enjoys wide backing from local environmental groups, which in the past have opposed transit sales-tax measures. "We feel that this is a plan we can accept," said Jana Haehl, president of the Marin Conservation League. "It will provide relief for congestion, and we feel strongly that something has to be done. This [measure] is the best that we can expect."

It almost goes without saying that alleviating traffic congestion and promoting local public transportation is an environmental service. The effects of air pollution are indeed real: Last year, a California EPA study in the East Bay found that children in neighborhoods with more traffic-related air pollutants have an increased risk of bronchitis and asthma episodes.

A poll conducted in March found that 73 percent of surveyed voters support Measure A. However, if it fails to pass, Supervisor Murray says Marin residents can expect major setbacks. The Highway 101 project would be delayed until 2015, increasing traffic. Local bus transit, which has seen almost 25 percent in cuts already, would continue to be slashed, including the Whistlestop service that transports seniors and the Stagecoach, West Marin's only bus system. And funding would vanish for Safe Routes to Schools, a program which encourages more walking and biking to school. Alternate sources of funding would have to be found to keep these projects alive if Measure A fails at the polls, Murray indicated.