



## Road tax plan heard by public

### Funds would aid transport projects

By JIM JOHNSON  
Herald Salinas Bureau

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Gonzales farmer Wayne Gularte likes some of the South County road improvements contained in the proposed half-cent transportation sales tax spending plan, especially frontage roads along Highway 101 that would allow him to haul his farm equipment without getting honked at.

"It was OK when the speed limit was 55, but then they raised it to 65 and everybody goes 75," Gularte said, adding that he would appreciate a few turnout and merge lanes at intervals along the busy Salinas Valley stretch of highway.

Gularte was one of a handful of South County residents who showed up at an open house at the Lions Hall in Soledad late Thursday sponsored by the Transportation Agency of Monterey County. The gathering was the third in a series of information meetings initiated by TAMC as part of its outreach effort on behalf of the sales tax.

But the Monterey County Farm Bureau member wasn't so sure he supported the sales tax until he remembered that the bureau is backing it, and he said that means it's OK with him. Gularte said the agricultural industry would pay a large portion of any sales tax increase and should expect to get its fair share of the transportation improvement pie.

Similar forums were held earlier in the week in Salinas and Castroville, and Monterey Peninsula residents will get their chance to review the

proposed sales tax spending plan at a forum in Seaside on Feb. 12.

Transportation officials are proposing a 25-year, half-cent sales tax that would raise about \$980 million as the centerpiece of the agency's \$1.8 billion transportation improvement plan. The money would pay for a long list of highway and road projects, as well as transit and alternative transportation priorities. The sales tax revenue and a regional development impact fee would be used to secure additional federal and state funding sources.

About half the sales tax revenue would be earmarked for highway and road improvements, a quarter would be designated for local road and street maintenance, and the rest would go to transit and alternative transportation.

The plan will be presented and considered by the county's cities in the next few months, and it must earn the approval from a majority representing a majority of the county's population before moving ahead.

If it earns final approval from the TAMC board of directors and the Board of Supervisors, the plan will be placed on the November ballot. It would require a two-thirds super-majority to pass.

A previous transportation sales tax measure failed to reach that level in 2006, but transportation officials are hopeful that they have the necessary support this time around.

In addition to the community forums, members of the TAMC staff have been making presentations to various community organizations and interest groups, including some in the agricultural industry, such as the Grower-Shipper Association, the hospitality and business industries and taxpayer groups.

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Don Bachman, TAMC's deputy executive director, said the agency began outreach much earlier than it did in its previous attempt, and the plan has remained flexible in an attempt to draw the broadest support possible.

Complaints by the Farm Bureau and the Monterey County Hospitality Association prompted changes to the spending plan that drew the staff's support.

Bachman said the response has been mostly positive.

"Nobody is telling us we don't need this," Bachman said. "Our message is, 'It's up to us to solve this problem.'"

Soledad Mayor Richard Ortiz, a TAMC board member, was at Thursday's event and said the version of the proposed spending plan made a much more concerted effort to reach out to the South County community.

"There's more concentration on South County now," Ortiz said, noting that much-needed highway on- and offramps in South County are included in the plan, as is money for expanded bus service to "get people out of their cars."

South County residents "all know the need," Ortiz said. "A lot of people travel on Highway 101 and they know how congested it gets."

"You always want more, but I think they finally figured out a formula that will work where all the communities benefit from this."

At the earlier forums, Salinas-area residents expressed support for the balanced nature of the plan despite hopes for more spending on alternative transportation, and North County attendees were focused mainly on Highway 156's widening

and Prunedale improvement projects, according to TAMC.

The community open house on the Peninsula will be held at 5:30 p.m. at the Seaside Community Center, 220 Coe Ave.

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**Proposed Sales Tax Investment Plan**

25-year, half-cent sales tax

Would raise more than \$980 million in sales tax revenues

Would leverage more than \$800 million in matching funds

(including state, federal, existing fees and new regional development impact fees)

**Spending:**

Safety and Congestion Relief Projects (50 percent)

- \* Highway 1 ð Widen to six lanes in Sand City/Seaside area

- \* Highway 68 ð Salinas to Monterey: safety and operational improvements

- \* Highway 68 ð Holman Highway widening

- \* Highway 101 - Harris Road interchange (south Salinas)

- \* Highway 101 ð San Juan Road interchange (at the Red Barn)

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- \* Highway 101 South County improvements (frontage roads, interchange improvements)
- \* Highway 156 widening and US 101/156 interchange reconstruction
- \* Del Monte/Lighthouse Avenue safety and operational improvements (Monterey)
- \* Westside Salinas Connector (new westside road and bus rapid transit corridor improvements between Boronda and Blanco Roads, with widening along Davis and Reservation Roads to East Garrison)
- \* Plans for future: East of Salinas Bypass

Local Road and Street Maintenance: (25 percent)

- \* Flexible local funding with priority for local road maintenance
- \* Requires maintenance of prior years' funding levels from other sources

Alternative Transportation: (25 percent)

- \* Transit (20 percent): Bus rapid transit corridors (75 percent) and other transit, including elderly/disabled: (25 percent)
- \* Regional Bicycle/Pedestrian facilities (3 percent)
- \* Smart growth transportation incentives and roadway habitat mitigations (2 percent)

Source: Transportation Agency for Monterey County

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