

San Diego County is divided over proposed half-cent tax for transportation projects



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A battle is raging over one of the most fundamental aspects of San Diego County's future: how folks get around.

Will commuters overwhelmingly continue to drive their cars to work, as they've done for decades? Or will lawmakers fashion a public transportation system — consisting largely of bus, trolley and train lines — that's efficient and sexy enough to appeal to millennials and perhaps their parents?

In the latest clash, green groups have joined [Republicans](#) to oppose a countywide, half-cent sales tax that would provide millions of dollars for public transit and bike lanes but also lock in money for specific highway projects.

With billions in transportation spending hanging in the balance, environmentalists have doubled down on their envisioned moratorium against expanding freeways. They're betting that public support will dramatically shift in favor of mass transit in coming years.

"Sprawl development isn't going to work anymore," said Nicole Capretz, executive director of the San Diego nonprofit Climate Action Campaign.

"It used to be that one or two organizations would care about freeway expansion. Now you have critical

mass, where we all understand that it's a huge driver of a lot of our problems," she said.



Conservatives are against the proposed levy because they either oppose new taxes or believe this one doesn't devote enough funding to roads and highways.

"It's not enough on the things that touch most people, which is freeways and interchanges," said Tony Krvaric, chairman of the county's Republican Party.

"We have a standing rule against any tax increase," he added. "So we start in opposition."

The proposal has strong support from some of the region's Democratic elected officials, who emphasize that about 86% of the money collected would go to non-highway projects such as bus and rail lines, preservation of open space and discretionary money for cities.

"This measure isn't for groups that want an all-or-nothing approach, but it will get us much closer to making more transportation options available for more people in the region," said San Diego City Councilman Todd Gloria.

While the tax proposal received a key approval Friday from the San Diego Assn. of Governments' 21-member board, on which Gloria sits, the targeted levy could face an uphill battle.

If the county Board of Supervisors agrees to put it on the ballot, the measure would need two-thirds voter approval in November to become law. Polling by the association in recent weeks shows the public's backing for the measure ranging from 67.8% to 62.2%, with support waning as voters learn more about the proposal.

If the measure passes, it would bring in about \$18 billion during the next four decades — accounting for about 28% of transportation funding that the regional agency obtains from the county's residents.

Perhaps more importantly, it would help cement the agency's hotly contested \$204-billion, long-range regional transportation plan. Although the half-cent tax levy wouldn't fund any new road projects, it would create a fresh voter mandate for widening stretches of highway that have faced opposition, such as state Highway 94 heading into downtown San Diego.

If the measure fails, it would probably set up a showdown going into 2020, when the San Diego Assn. of Governments would update that regional transportation blueprint. The agency also could put forth a revised tax proposal that same year, timed to coincide with a presidential election, when typically larger voter turnout improves the chances for passage of tax increases.

A coalition of environmentalists, labor unions and social justice advocates is pushing for the face-off that could culminate in four years.

The group has attacked the half-cent tax proposal for not doing enough to address climate change or limit freeway pollution in urban neighborhoods. Specifically, they argue that the plan delays transit projects while prioritizing freeways in the near term.

"Research has shown that this approach to transportation planning further burdens communities with air pollution and does not relieve traffic congestion in the long run," said Monique López, a policy advocate with the Environmental Health Coalition in National City. "We cannot afford to spend more money on old ways of planning."

In an attempt to win support for the tax levy, San Diego Assn. of Governments officials have signaled that the money in that proposal would help speed up public transit projects. They've also warned that if the initiative fails in November, the first thing to go will probably be the bus and rail lines.

"If there's no new local money, then we probably have to cut a bunch of projects out of the plan," said Gary Gallegos, executive director of the agency. "The roads wouldn't be cut out, but they would happen way later."

Agency officials also say the proposal was crafted to be politically viable.

"If we put it all into [mass] transit, that measure won't win," Gallegos said. "The guys in North County are not going to vote for it. If we made it all roads, that wouldn't win either."

The labor-environmental coalition has remained largely unconvinced. Instead, its members recruited San Diego Mayor [Kevin Faulconer](#), a prominent Republican, to help kill the proposal.

Threatening to pull support for San Diego's nationally recognized and recently approved Climate Action Plan, which Faulconer backs, they have said the proposed freeway expansion projects would undermine efforts to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions outlined in the anti-global-warming framework. That's because those efforts hinge on boosting the use of mass transit.

On Friday, Faulconer made a rare appearance on the San Diego Assn. of Governments board to vote against the half-cent tax proposal. The mayor, who declined to comment for this article, routinely sends an alternate to the agency's meetings.

Snubbing what would have been an unthinkable progressive funding measure a decade ago, the anti-

freeway coalition hopes that defeating the tax proposal — and thus delaying the association's ability to fund its current transportation priorities — will only strengthen its position.

Public opinion is shifting away from the misguided concept that adding highway lanes will improve drive times, said Colin Parent, policy counsel for the nonprofit think tank Circulate San Diego.

"The idea that highway expansions don't work and only add to congestion is becoming a more mainstream concept," he said. "It's not just environmentalists who are recognizing a real problem with a highway expansion model."

*Smith writes for the San Diego Union-Tribune.***ALSO**