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Published May 18th, 2016

Proposed Half-Cent Sales Tax Increase Would Benefit Local Transportation

By Sora O'Doherty

Chief deputy director of the Contra Costa Transportation Authority Ross Chittenden outlined the benefits of CCTA's proposed Transportation Expenditure Plan (TEP) at the May 3 Orinda City Council meeting, stating that 40 to 42 percent of a proposed half-cent sales tax hike would be dedicated to local transportation programs administered by Contra Costa's cities, such as improving eastbound access to Highway 24 from Orinda. This is a higher level than was devoted to local programs by earlier transportation Measures C and J.

As a result of extensive community outreach efforts, CCTA determined that Contra Costa residents have six transportation priorities: extend and improve BART; repair roads; protect the environment; encourage transportation alternatives; relieve and smooth traffic flow; and improve bus service.

The CCTA is currently stumping for city support. After the meeting, Chittenden told the Lamorinda Weekly that funds generated by the tax hike would be poured into three buckets: transit support, state highways, and local streets and roads.

Chittenden said that for the measure to go on the November ballot, the statute requires approval by the majority of the cities that represent a majority of the population, plus the County Board of Supervisors. In reality, Chittenden said, all the municipalities and the county need to be on board for the ballot measure to succeed, so the CCTA is hoping for unanimous support.

The CCTA is separate from the county, although it is a countywide agency, explained Chittenden. As a revenue-generating proposal, the proposed sales tax hike would require a two-thirds majority vote to succeed. Orinda will be one of the first cities to vote on whether or not to support the issue, with other cities getting their chance to say yay or nay later in June and early July, Chittenden said. Not to be confused with Measure L, Orinda's proposed sales tax measure which is on the June ballot, the CCTA proposal would be directly tied to transportation projects, and follows Measure C, adopted in 1988, and Measure J, adopted with 71 percent voter approval in 2004. Under the earlier measures, the CCTA provided the extension of BART to Pittsburg and Antioch, made improvements to the Caldecott Tunnel, widened Highway 4, added better bus service, bicycle facilities, and enhanced services for students and seniors.

BART may also be placing a bond issue on the November ballot. When Measure J passed in 2004, a BART bond on the same ballot also passed. BART wants to improve service by providing a new train control system and new cars that would result in greater capacity and shorter wait times, with more 10-car trains able to run more continuously than the current shorter trains.

Other improvements planned by the CCTA include a mobility manager for seniors to provide transportation for them from their homes to their destinations, six additional school bus routes under the Safe Route to School program, and innovative technology to improve the flow of traffic. The matter of TEP will return to the council on May 31 for a vote. The council meeting was originally scheduled for June 7, but was cancelled due to the California Primary Election, and a special meeting calendared for May 31.

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