

## **Ballot deadline passes with nothing for transportation**

Kurtis Alexander - Sentinel Staff Writer

There's plenty of issues on the ballot this November, but there's one that will be noticeably absent. County voters will not be considering a measure to pay for local transportation projects.

A far-reaching initiative that would have expanded the highway, the bus system and bike and pedestrian routes fell out of favor six months ago, after more than two years of planning, and a subsequent push for a more modest roads measure fizzled.

The deadline to put an initiative on the ballot passed earlier this month.

"I wish that this was the election for a transportation tax or road tax, there's no question about that," county Supervisor Ellen Pirie said. "But I think it's worse to put one on if there's no chance it will pass, and that's how I feel."

After the county Regional Transportation Commission voted in February to abandon a \$600 million sales tax measure, Pirie led efforts to recoup at least some of the \$100 million proposed for roads through a countywide roads tax. But studies showed little support.

"It just doesn't seem like the right time," Pirie said last week.

The absence of local tax revenue leaves transportation leaders wrestling with how to fund roughly \$2 billion worth of transportation proposals, according to transportation commission estimates earlier this year. Among the projects are widening Highway 1, building a rail-trail along the Union Pacific corridor and fixing potholes on thousands of neighborhood streets.

"Transportation is in a critical state now for a lack of funding," said George Dondero, head of the transportation commission.

On top of losing opportunities for local revenue, Dondero is now worried about the state raiding county funding as legislators in Sacramento try to patch up their budget gap.

The county Public Works Department, meanwhile, is dealing with a \$100 million backlog of roadwork that would have been at least partially addressed with either of the tax proposals discussed this year.

"The conditions of the roads is noticeably worse, and we've seen a much greater increase of traffic on Highway 1," said Rio del Mar resident Steve Peterson, who has lived in the county for 21 years. "I hope we can get this worked out."

County Treasurer Fred Keeley, who convened a task force three years ago to look at what transportation projects voters would support, looks back at the year with disappointment.

"I'll tell you as a resident of Santa Cruz County I am personally saddened by the lack of apparent leadership on the RTC," he said.

The transportation commission's sales tax proposal, which fell apart after opposition emerged and support dwindled, was the agency's second ballot plan in four years. Voters rejected a similar transportation package in 2004.

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