

County leaders press on with 'pothole' tax

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County leaders are moving ahead with plans for a tax to fund road repairs, despite suggestions that the pursuit is doomed by the bad economy and could face legal and timing challenges.

Tuesday, the Board of Supervisors unanimously agreed to commence with a public opinion poll, at a cost of up to \$30,000, to see if county residents would be willing to pay for improved road upkeep -- be it through a November sales tax or some type of parcel tax.

"I think the need is obvious and immediate," said Supervisor Neal Coonerty.

The county's Public Works Department has estimated that more than \$100 million is needed to address a maintenance backlog on the county's 600 miles of unincorporated roads.

A previous transportation tax plan, which would have raised \$600 million over 35 years with earmarks for roads, fell apart earlier this year, and a county staff report released last week suggests that any new tax effort would be dogged by the current economic downturn.

The public opinion poll, to be conducted by San Francisco-based Gene Bregman and Associates, will assess the feasibility of a number of taxes, including raising parcel fees for residents of unincorporated areas as well as levying a countywide sales tax.

State law prevents the county from imposing a sales tax exclusively on residents of the unincorporated areas. County officials say that puts them at a disadvantage because most cities in the county already have sales taxes that go toward road improvements and residents there would be less likely to support an additional countywide tax.

"They all have their own measures that we can't have ... That doesn't seem fair to me," said Supervisor Jan Beautz.

In addition to moving forward with polling, the board agreed Tuesday to petition state legislators about changing the law to grant the county authority to assess a tax on only unincorporated residents.

That authority, however, would not likely come before the August deadline to put a tax measure on the November ballot.

County officials have suggested that a new tax could raise between \$2 million and \$8 million annually. Contact Kurtis Alexander at 706-3267 or kalexander@santacruzsentinel.com.