

Prospects dim for even modest Santa Cruz County transportation tax

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New efforts to address the county's deteriorating roads are facing an old problem: the economy.

A county report released Friday suggests the economic downturn has voters in no mood to support a November tax measure, even if it's smaller than the 35-year, \$600 million transportation initiative that collapsed earlier this year.

"The unstated message is this is going to be difficult," said county Supervisor Ellen Pirie, who is leading the charge to draft a modest corollary to the failed measure.

Her hope is to raise at least some money to cut into more than \$100 million of backlogged road repairs across the county.

Roadwork, Pirie figures, is something everybody needs and supports. More grandiose projects, like rail improvements and highway widening, which were part of the first tax measure, were more controversial and, in tough economic times, less likely to win voter approval.

The County Administrative Office, at the request of the Board of Supervisors, looked into various sales and property taxes -- with potential annual revenues ranging from \$2 million to \$8 million. In a report before the board today, the office concludes: "The current recession makes voter approval of a measure involving new taxes difficult" and any chance of it passing would hinge on an "effective campaign."

The Santa Cruz County Business Council, which was expected to finance the campaign for the earlier transportation measure until it withdrew support in light of tight "economic" conditions, meets today to discuss its position on an alternative measure.

Monday, the council's executive director Jim Conklin remained skeptical.

"With what's going on in New York and the markets, and teachers getting pink slips, I would agree with the staff report that it does look grim," he said.

Pirie says despite the prognosis she will continue to pursue a tax plan, at least until a poll of voters is conducted.

A quarter-cent sales tax or an increase in the current \$56 property assessment are both on the table.

"We have to find some way to repair our roads," Pirie said. "[But] at the same time, I don't want to move forward if there's no chance."

At stake are 600 miles of county roads that the Public Works Department says it doesn't have the money to maintain. Higher costs of making fixes on top of less state and federal funding is at the heart of the problem.

The tax measure that failed earlier this year would have allotted more than \$100 million for road and neighborhood improvements.

"We're in a difficult situation now," said John Presleigh, assistant director of Public Works. "And it's just going to worsen substantially if we don't start maintaining the roads."

Passage of a local tax measure, county officials say, would have the additional benefit of allowing the county to compete for state transportation funds, which are often limited to regions that already tax themselves for transportation purposes.

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