

Measure C fails to win extension

Half-cent sales tax for roads and transportation needs in Fresno County comes up short at polls.

By Jim Davis

The Fresno Bee

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Fresno County voters concerned about sprawl and their pocketbooks slammed the brakes Tuesday on Measure C, an extension of the half-cent sales tax for roads and transportation.

About 54% of voters favored the measure, but it needed a two-thirds majority to pass. Shan Hays, who voted at Viking Elementary School on Ashlan Avenue in northeast Fresno, said he wanted to see more money go toward transit.

"We can use the highways, but I'd like to see money going for things to cut down on the traffic," Hays said.

Ruby Raya, who cast her vote at Fresno Central Seventh Day Adventist Fellowship Hall in central Fresno near Freeway 41, said she was concerned about the economy. "There's only so much money in the pot," said Raya, saying she instead preferred seeing money go to the education measures.

The majority of voters supported Measure C.

Pat Redell voted for it, saying he considered it an investment in the community. "This city is going to grow, and we need to have proper roads, thoroughfares and mass transportation," said Redell, who also voted at Viking Elementary.

The county already has an existing Measure C, a half-cent sales tax that was passed by voters in 1986. The tax has been used to build most of Fresno's freeway system. But it is scheduled to expire in 2007.

Tuesday, voters were asked to extend the measure for 30 years.

When the original Measure C was on the ballot, it required only a simple majority to pass (it got 57.5%). This time, because of a 1991 state Supreme Court ruling, it needed two-thirds, or almost 67%.

Gordon Webster Jr., chairman of the Yes on Measure C committee and chairman of the board of the Fresno Chamber of Commerce, said he was disappointed in the vote. "I don't know what happens now," Webster said. "We certainly need this measure."

Webster said opponents scared voters with slogans about asthma and air pollution.

"Personally, I felt the people who voted no voted no for the wrong reasons," Webster said.

Most of the opponents, including the League of Women Voters, say they want to craft a new, better version of Measure C.

Kevin Hall of the local chapter of the Sierra Club said that voters told leaders to "wake up and smell the traffic."

"I look forward to working on a good Measure C," Hall said. "I think the voters sent a very clear message to local leaders that they're ready for a new direction."

Many voters interviewed at the polls said they wanted the tax to pay for new roads. Tom Plesche, who voted at Peace Lutheran Church in north-central Fresno, said he likes the freeways in the community. "It cut down my commute to work to about 15 minutes," he said.

Others said they were concerned about sprawl and air quality. Patricia Campos of central Fresno voted for Measure C. She is worried about air quality, saying that her 5-year-old daughter has asthma. She had hoped that more money would pay to improve the bus systems and other transit.

"Who does not want cleaner air?" Campos asked.

Jan Skopal biked to the polling station at Peace Lutheran Church. He voted against Measure C, saying he worried that it would subsidize growth. "I'll do anything to slow development," Skopal said. "Even if it means that I can't jump on a freeway and zip around anywhere I want to go."

Marleen Newburn of Fresno voted against Measure C, saying that she is concerned about sprawl. She said the community needs to fill in vacant lots.

"We already have a lot of urban sprawl," Newburn said. "If you build a lot of freeways up into the foothills, people are just going to follow."

Measure M lacks 5 percent of passing

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By Daniel Velton, Merced Sun-Star

A proposed half-percent sales tax increase known as Measure M on the ballot did not pass Tuesday, ending up 5 percent shy of the required two-thirds vote.

About 61 percent voted for the measure and about 39 percent voted against it.

If approved, the measure would have generated more than \$212 million during the 20-year life of the tax, and all the money would have gone to transportation projects and programs.

Jesse Brown, executive director of the Merced County Association of Governments, which initiated the measure, said Tuesday evening, "I'm certainly disappointed. It's unfortunate that the vote results won't make the roads better."

Regarding the next step for transportation projects, he said the news will be brought before the MCAG governing board and they will decide how to proceed.

Bryant Owens, spokesman for the No on Measure M Committee, said, "I think a vote against Measure M is a vote against UC Merced, so I'm elated... I don't think this tax would have addressed the needs in the county."

Owens said the fact that the measure didn't pass will force government to take "a long, hard look" at how much the cost of development in the county will be.

"I'm really happy it was defeated, and I hope elected officials will now take a look at growing responsibly instead of growing rapidly," he said.

Owens added that the county is primarily agricultural and any new construction needs to be approached with caution.

According to MCAG, the money that would have been raised by the tax would have been split equally between the incorporated and unincorporated areas for road maintenance. Fifty percent would have gone toward road projects in the cities and 50 percent toward areas outside of city limits.

Proposed Measure M projects included:

- * Widening Bellevue Road from Highway 59 to the Campus Parkway, at a total cost of \$14 million. An estimated \$8 million would come from new tax revenue.
- * Realigning Highway 59 with Castle Parkway, at a total cost of about \$137 million. An estimated \$30 million would come from the new tax dollars.
- * Widening Highway 140 to four lanes from Santa Fe Avenue to Campus Parkway, at a cost of \$16 million. A total of \$10 million would come from the new tax.

