

Proposed sales tax measure well-received by Yolo County residents

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A new one-half percent county sales tax may find its way on the November ballot to address early childhood education, homelessness, and road maintenance concerns.

In March, the Yolo County Board of Supervisors received a staff presentation on two potential sales tax measures centered around transportation infrastructure and universal preschool. A Sales Tax Measure Subcommittee, consisting of supervisors Oscar Villegas and Jim Provenza, was appointed to “provide fact-finding and policy guidance to staff.”

According to County Administrator Patrick Blacklock, these programs have historically been plagued by a lack of adequate, stable funding.

Proponents of the early education programs argue that at least 41 percent of three- and four-year-olds in Yolo County do not experience preschool before starting kindergarten which has created a “school readiness gap” and county Farm Bureau President Jeff Merwin echoed many residents’ sentiments on the state of the county’s roads at the previous meeting, “I can’t particularly say we support a tax in any way, but our roads are in deplorable condition so we are willing to listen to see what we can put together here.”

The tax measure could raise \$6.8 to \$8.4 million countywide per year for public purposes and the tax increase would disappear in 10 years.

The tax must be approved by a majority of county voters and, as such, the Board subcommittee hired FM3 Consulting to conduct research gaging public opinion on these issues.

Four hundred telephone interviews were conducted to gather residents’ opinions on improving early education access and quality, reducing homelessness, and increasing local road maintenance. Each resident was presented with the following draft language, “Shall the County of Yolo enact a one-half percent sales tax for general government purposes that include local priorities such as: improving preschool/early childhood education access and quality; reducing homelessness; and increasing local road maintenance and repair; within the County for a limited period of 10 years, with independent annual audits of all expenditures made available to the public and reviewed by the Yolo County Financial Oversight Committee?”

The study found that over 60 percent of those surveyed supported the tax increase, both before and after positive messaging.

Additionally, proposing a quarter-cent tax increase, instead, did not bring broader support.

County Counsel Phil Pogleditch emphasized the fact that the tax, if approved, would be a general tax measure — meaning that the county would be prioritizing certain funding areas, but ultimately could spend the money for other purposes without requiring permission from voters.

At Tuesday's Board of Supervisors meeting the Board considered these findings in combination with comments from attending county residents.

"The reason both of these go to the top — the repairing roads and preschools — is because of the tremendous need and lack of alternative funding," explained Provenza before opening the public comment period.

Yolo residents spoke on the measure for more than an hour — with no opposition raised and the overwhelming majority coming out in support of early education funding.

Yolo County Superintendent of Schools Jesse Ortiz asserted, "You will not find a better economic development program than preschool — statewide, countywide, nationally."

"We have approximately 4,600 children in Yolo County today," he continued. "... this is a very unique opportunity for Yolo County and the Board of Supervisors to take on the opportunity of having quality preschool for most of our children — if not all of our children — in the county."

Other leaders in education such as the Esparto School District Superintendent, the director of First 5 Yolo, and two UC Davis professors voiced their support as well.

Woodland City Councilman Angel Barajas and former state Supreme Court Justice Crus Reynoso also urged the supervisors to put the measure on the November ballot.

"It is so important to make sure that they [children] start right," said Reynoso noting the "grammar school to prison pipeline" in reference to the phenomenon of excluded and struggling children ending up in the criminal justice system.

The supervisors were generally in support of moving forward with the measure except for Supervisor Matt Rexroad.

"I'm a long way from supporting this measure ... nothing in here is a plan," Rexroad argued. "I think if you're going to raise peoples' taxes you owe them a plan."

The Board approved a motion to move forward with drafting an ordinance and refining the tax plan, to be discussed further in two weeks — with only Rexroad in opposition.

According to Blacklock, the plan will include factoring in a complementary approach with local cities, as West Sacramento and Woodland are both considering sales tax measures for similar purposes.

"It's not enough, but it's a good beginning," Supervisor Don Saylor said in support of the measure.