

Pasadena Star News

710 tunnel funds on tax proposal

By Dan Abendschein, Staff Writer

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A draft copy of a project list for a half-cent sales tax hike that could appear on the November ballot includes \$780 million for a 4.5-mile tunnel that would connect the 710 Freeway to the 210 Freeway.

The draft was obtained by this newspaper from the office of a San Gabriel Valley legislator. Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority spokesman Rick Jager said the project list is still being worked on and that he could not comment on it until the final report is released. He said that could happen as soon as today.

A route for that tunnel has not yet been established.

A 2006 Metropolitan Transportation Authority study concluded that the project is feasible, but a study with more concrete details, including the route, will not be completed for up to two years.

The agency has been exploring the idea of finding a private company to pay for the bulk of the project, in return for the rights to charge tolls to use the tunnel.

Some local officials have suggested that the estimated \$4.3 billion to \$5.5 billion cost of the project could be paid for entirely by a private company. Thus, the \$780 million in earmarked public funds on the draft list of projects surprised at least one local legislator, who did not expect to see it funded by the sales tax increase at all.

"If it weren't in print I would have thought they were playing a joke on the San Gabriel Valley," said Assemblyman Anthony Portantino, D-La Canada Flintridge, who has opposed any action on the tunnel until a detailed study is done.

Even supporters of the project were surprised by the news. Assemblyman Mike Eng, D-Monterey Park, who has long supported the tunnel, had not heard anything about the list until contacted by this newspaper.

"The 710 has always been a priority in my district, but it needs to be discussed in the San Gabriel Valley Caucus, like any other issue," said Eng.

For decades, an above-ground extension to the freeway was considered by lawmakers, but South Pasadena, which would have been split by the project, opposed it.

Cities adjacent to the 10 Freeway, which have dealt with increased street traffic, have long pushed for the extension, while some foothill cities, like La Canada Flintridge, have opposed it because of fears of increased traffic on the 210.