

Pasadena Star News

Sales-tax measure causes rift

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By Dan Abendschein
Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES - A proposed half-cent sales tax measure that was intended for the November ballot is now headed for a legal showdown between Los Angeles County and its transportation agency.

The county Board of Supervisors took the unusual step Tuesday of voting 3-2 not to allow the measure to appear on its consolidated ballot.

In response, Metropolitan Transportation Authority officials Tuesday said they plan to sue the board.

The board's slight could cost the MTA nearly \$3 million - the cost it would incur to put the measure on its own separate ballot, which would be distributed to voters in November alongside the customary consolidated ballot.

The sales-tax measure, which would raise an estimated \$40 billion over 30 years, has resulted in regional divides over which projects the money would be used to fund, and it has led to a split within both the MTA board and the Board of Supervisors.

All five of the supervisors are also on the MTA board. The three supervisors who voted not to consolidate the ballot also voted on whether to put the ballot on the measure at all at last month's MTA meeting.

Supervisor Michael Antonovich, who represents parts of the San Gabriel Valley, voted against the measure at both last month's and Tuesday's meetings. Supervisor Gloria Molina, who represents East Los Angeles and parts of the San Gabriel Valley, abstained at the MTA meeting, but she voted against consolidation at Tuesday's supervisors' meeting.

Supervisor Don Knabe, who represents the southern coastal areas and parts of southern Los Angeles, missed last month's MTA board meeting. But he had previously voiced his opposition to the measure. He voted against the measure at Tuesday's meeting.

Antonovich and Molina's opposition stems from their belief that too much of the measure's money would go to the city of Los Angeles and Westside cities such as Culver City and Santa Monica. Supervisors Zev Yaroslavsky and Yvonne Burke, who represent those areas, both voted in favor of the measure at both meetings.

Antonovich introduced an amendment at last month's MTA meeting that would have required individual sub-regions, like the San Gabriel Valley, receive a percentage of the funding equal to its population. The amendment was voted down.

Antonovich and MTA board member John Fasana, who is also a Duarte council member, also tried to get the agency to commit \$80 million to a 24-mile extension of the Gold Line. That

money would have been contingent on the agency receiving \$320 million in federal funding. But that amendment was also voted down by the MTA board.

In passing the half-cent sales tax measure, the MTA board also authorized the agency to sue the Board of Supervisors if it would not consolidate, which the agency said Tuesday it now plans to do.

"We're trying to get in front of a judge this week," said Rick Jager, an MTA spokesman.

The agency is on a tight deadline to get the issue resolved: The county registrar's office has a Friday deadline for November ballot measures, and it is uncertain how the case might be resolved in court.

Jager says that the agency will push for a judge to force the county to consolidate the election, but will still pursue a separate ballot, despite the increased cost.

Dean Logan, the county registrar, said his office would be looking into whether it will be technically feasible for the county to issue two ballots on the same date. He estimated the cost of a second ballot at about \$2.8 million, although he said that his office will need to make more exact cost estimates.

If a second ballot happens, Logan said, it would be the first time in his experience that a Los Angeles County election would have more than one ballot.

"It's never been done, as far as I know," said Logan. "Typically, asking the Board of Supervisors to consolidate a ballot measure is just a formality."

Tony Bell, a deputy staff member for Antonovich, said the MTA should consider pulling back the ballot measure and taking it up at a future date.

"It is looking like a losing battle for them," said Bell. "Considering how much opposition there has been, and the extra cost of a separate ballot, they should not force this down the throats of county voters."

For the sales tax measure to succeed, it now will not only have to survive the legal struggle, but also be authorized by state legislators, who are meeting on the issue Thursday. The deadline to pass legislation is Friday.