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MTA tax measure goes to ballot

Valley leaders oppose hike

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LOS ANGELES - The board of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority voted Thursday to put a half-cent sales tax measure on the November ballot that could provide as much as \$40 billion for county transit projects over 30 years.

After amendments failed that would require the MTA to review the list of projects the tax would fund every six years, the MTA board voted 9-2 to put the tax on the ballot.

The measure must receive approval from the state Legislature before Aug. 8 in order to be placed on the ballot.

The amendments calling for six-year reviews came from two San Gabriel Valley-area board members who felt that the area, and others in the county, were not getting their fair share of the money.

"We have to assure that the over 60 percent who live outside Los Angeles and will be generating funds for the county get their fair share," said L.A. County Supervisor Michael Antonovich. "You're not going to get votes from the San Gabriel Valley for a subway to the sea if it does not get a light-rail system."

John Fasana, a Duarte council member who is on the MTA board, also opposed the bill.

According to MTA reports, the San Gabriel Valley has 18.3 percent of the county's population. It would receive 16.4 percent of the funding from the tax measure.

Antonovich and Fasana are not alone among San Gabriel Valley leaders opposed to the measure.

The Metro Gold Line Foothill Extension Authority, an independent organization founded by MTA to work on the proposed 24-mile Gold Line rail extension to the county border, voted to oppose the measure.

The Gold Line Phase II Joint Powers Authority, a delegation of council representatives from Arcadia, Monrovia, Duarte, Irwindale, Azusa, Glendora, SanDimas, La Verne, Pomona and Claremont, also voted to oppose it.

Additionally, the staff of the San Gabriel Valley Council of Governments is recommending that the group vote to oppose the measure at its next meeting.

Antonovich and Fasana contended that the Gold Line and other San Gabriel Valley transit projects are not getting their fair share of funding from an expenditure list that determines how the sales tax money will be used.

The amendments suggested by Fasana and Antonovich would have required the MTA to look at dividing the money based on population. Fasana's motion was defeated by a 7-5 vote.

County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, who represents West Los Angeles and coastal cities, spoke against the amendments, claiming that the population of an area is not the best way to determine how much money it should get.

"During peak hours, there are almost three times as many people in Santa Monica than live in Santa Monica," said Yaroslavsky. "Maybe we should base it on the population of employment centers during working hours."

The Westside cities region, which will benefit from funds allocated for subway and light rail expansion projects, would receive 9.2 percent of the sales tax measure, despite having only 2.1 percent of the population, according to MTA staff reports.

The sales-tax measure will now face a state hearing on Aug. 4.

Assemblyman Mike Feuer, D-Los Angeles, who is sponsoring the legislation creating the sale tax measure, said at Thursday's meeting that a consensus on the measure has been reached in Sacramento.

In contrast to the stiff opposition from local agencies and governments, several state legislators representing the San Gabriel Valley said Thursday they likely will support the measure.

Assemblyman Ed Hernandez, D-West Covina, chairs the San Gabriel Valley Caucus, the forum where area legislators meet to handle issues. He said the caucus would meet next week to discuss the measure, but he felt it was fair to the San Gabriel Valley.

"Everything the caucus asked for was put in the bill," said Hernandez, referring to a meeting last month the group had with Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, who chairs the MTA board.

"My sense is this is going to move along quickly in the legislature."

Sen. Gloria Romero, D-Los Angeles, said that while she still needed to examine the measure more closely, the legislation had come a long way in the last month.

"The original bill was fundamentally flawed," said Romero. "It was very disrespectful to the San Gabriel Valley."

The sales-tax measure contains \$735 million for the Gold Line extension. The original legislation included only \$328 million and defined the Gold Line as only extending as far as the Azusa/Glendora border.

The revised ballot measure's wording now says the extension should be built "towards Montclair," the first city beyond the county border line.

Still, some local officials are concerned that the \$735 million earmarked for the project falls far short of the extension's estimated cost of \$1.4 billion.

Habib Balian, the head of the Foothill Extension Authority, said he was also concerned that the \$735 million figure includes an expensive rail maintenance yard project that MTA says it needs in order to supply transit lines all over the county. That yard is expected to cost \$113 million, according to MTA spokesman Rick Jager.

Balian said he was also concerned by provisions in the measure that would allow the board to change funding amounts or change established project time lines with a two-thirds vote.

"If you have a popular project, then there is nothing to worry about," said Balian. "The Gold Line is not that popular with the board, though."

In a separate MTA agenda item, the board also rejected, once again, the allocation of \$80 million in funding for the Gold Line.

That funding would have been contingent on the federal government contributing \$320million - an amount that was recommended in a bill that was signed into law in June.

The sales tax measure bill also allocates \$780 million for the 710 Freeway tunnel project, which would connect that freeway to the 210 Freeway, and \$509 million for work on the dangerous interchange of the 10 and 605 freeways.