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Villaraigosa wants voters to extend sales tax to fund transit

L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa will pitch his proposed November ballot measure to L.A. County voters in his State of the City speech Wednesday evening.

By Ari Bloomekatz, Los Angeles Times

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Faced with a congressional stalemate over transportation funding, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa wants county voters to approve an indefinite extension of a half-cent sales tax used for transit projects.

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A proposed November ballot measure will be a centerpiece of Villaraigosa's State of the City address Wednesday evening at Paramount Studios in Hollywood, according to the mayor's office.

It marks the latest effort by the mayor, who is trying to cement a legacy as a transportation visionary during his final year in office, to borrow against future tax revenues and rapidly expand L.A. County's transit system.

Villaraigosa also has pushed a plan to get the federal government to lend Los Angeles billions of dollars so officials can complete 30 years of transportation projects in 10 years and create thousands of jobs.

The open-ended continuation of Measure R, a sales tax increase approved by voters in 2008 that runs until 2039, would allow the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority to raise billions of dollars in the coming years for construction of a subway extension to the Westside, a key downtown light-rail connection and a host of other projects.

"By continuing Measure R, we will be creating jobs, relieving highway congestion, and completing light rail and subway projects in one decade instead of three," said Peter Sanders, a spokesman for Villaraigosa.

There are potential benefits to the mayor's plan, but it also could tie up funding for future transportation needs, said Martin Wachs, a researcher at the Santa Monica-based Rand Corp.

"It's a trade-off that we have to make," he said. "The mayor is judging that the importance of completing the projects sooner and creating jobs in the construction [field] in the shorter term are all benefits to Los Angeles.

"But it should be noted there are costs ... we will have less flexibility in the future, less money for operations, maintenance and other new projects," Wachs said.

Voter appetite for a transit tax extension as the region struggles to emerge from a deep economic slump remains to be seen. The measure would need to be approved by two-thirds of the county's voters.

According to a recent poll by the Center for the Study of Los Angeles at Loyola Marymount University, 53.9% of city residents surveyed said they would vote to extend Measure R beyond 30 years. About 37% said they would be opposed and 8.76% didn't know.

Bart Reed, executive director of the Transit Coalition, which backs transit development, said that extending Measure R could reduce future project costs.

"If we built some of these sooner than later, we end up paying present value money rather than later value money," Reed said.

The mayor's proposal partly reflects problems encountered by his earlier efforts. His bid to win financing from Washington has run into opposition in the Republican-controlled House. Villaraigosa also has explored possible deals with the Chinese government to help fast-track transit projects.

Extending the transit sales tax increase, which boosted the Los Angeles County tax rate to 9.75%, one of the highest in the nation, has been suggested before. And Assemblyman Mike Feuer (D-Los Angeles) has proposed state legislation to pave the way for a tax-extension vote.

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