

Bumpy ride for road tax measures

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A majority of voters in Stanislaus, San Joaquin, and Merced counties cast ballots Tuesday in favor of a half-cent sales tax increase to fund road and transit system improvements.

But only San Joaquin County appeared to have a large enough majority — nearly 78 percent — to meet the two-thirds, or 67 percent, "super majority" requirement to win passage.

The approximately 58 percent of voters who favored Measure K in Stanislaus County and 60 percent backing Measure G in Merced County would have been enough for a solid victory in any other election contest — a fact not lost on Craig Lewis, chairman of the Stanislaus County Yes on K campaign.

"We have a vast majority, 58 percent, of people in this community concerned about traffic," Lewis said Tuesday night. "So, what are we, as a community, going to do about it? If not the sales tax, what? If someone's got a better idea, we're all ears."

There also was frustration and disappointment in Merced County.

"It is what it is," said Mike Nelson, chairman of the Merced County Board of Supervisors. "The people have spoken. They don't want the extra half-cent. We'll just have to deal with what we've got."

In Stanislaus County, revenue generated by the half-cent tax hike — estimated at more than \$1 billion over its 30-year life-span — would have been locally controlled. It only could have been used for road and transit system improvements.

The county and each of its nine cities would have received a share.

Without the sales tax hike and the revenue it would have generated, Lewis and other Measure K supporters say, Stanislaus County will remain near the bottom of the pecking order when trying to qualify for state and federal road.

"Without the sales tax," Lewis said, "there's no way to get the matching funds we need."

Opponents of Measure K have said the county and its cities already receive enough money to fix roads but have chosen to use money earmarked for transportation for other purposes.

Late Tuesday, former Modesto Councilman Bill Conrad, who led the opposition to Measure K, said city and county leaders needed to concentrate on getting a bigger share of existing sources of road and transit funding such as vehicle license fees.

And, Conrad added, "we need to adjust developer fees."

Lewis, however, said Tuesday night that even if city and county governments reprioritized their spending and designated more money for roads and transit systems, it still would not be enough to secure needed matching funds.

Though Lewis was disappointed with the poor early showing for Measure K in the absentee balloting, he had still held out hope that voters who went to the polls Tuesday might provide a boost.

"We didn't do a demographic study as to who those absentee voters are," Lewis said. "We're just going to have to wait and see."

Nearly the entire San Joaquin Valley — Stanislaus, Merced, San Joaquin, Madera, Fresno, Tulare and Kern counties — pursued sales tax hikes this year to help fund road and transit projects.

Experts attributed the trend to urban growth and development sweeping the region.

In 2004, seven of 10 county transportation sales tax measures statewide met the super-majority threshold — good for a 70 percent success rate. But the seven successful measures asked voters to extend an existing transportation sales taxes. The three that failed were making first-time proposals.

San Joaquin County asked voters Tuesday to renew existing transportation sales tax measures and more than 77 percent of them did.

In Madera, where the transportation tax retired in 2005, 74 percent of the voters were approving a new version.

A first-time transportation tax in Kern County wasn't faring as well, receiving just 56 percent support from voters, according to unofficial returns.

A new transportation sales tax in Tulare County, meanwhile, received 66.62 percent of the vote Tuesday — just shy of the 66.6 percent plus one vote requirement for passage. It was not clear early today how many absentee and provisional remained to be counted.

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