



Eric Paul Zamora / The Fresno Bee

Rocio Portillo, 19, listens to hip-hop and R&B on her iPod while she dances along Shaw Avenue at Highway 41 on Tuesday night, waving her support for Measure C.

Fresno Co. road tax doesn't hit a dead end

Voters drive Measure C extension to easy victory with 77% approval.

By Russell Clemings and Marc Benjamin / The Fresno Bee

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Fresno County voters Tuesday overwhelmingly supported extending a half-cent sales tax for road improvements.

With nearly 100% of precincts reporting, 77% of voters approved Measure C, a 20-year extension of a sales tax increase first approved in 1986 when only a simple majority was required.

"It says the message got out and people recognize the importance of transportation to this community," said Fresno Chamber of Commerce President Al Smith, whose agency backed the measure. "We feel that a good cross-section of the community put together a good program where everyone benefits."

The original Measure C raised about \$700 million and helped complete a metropolitan-area freeway system that had been planned since the 1950s.

An extension attempt in 2002 won only 54% of the vote, below the two-thirds needed to pass, after an unusual coalition of anti-tax groups and environmentalists joined forces to oppose it. This time, however, environmentalists stayed on board when a larger share of funds was set aside for improving bus and van pool services.

Only two organized opponents emerged — the Valley Taxpayers Coalition and the Clovis Chamber of Commerce. Both said they wanted more money for street improvements in the Fresno-Clovis area.

Fran Blackney, business advocate for the Clovis Chamber of Commerce, said the only opposition the chamber posed was from participating in debates.

"Our main issue is the amount that went to public transit instead of roads," she said. "We stand proud of our vote, and if it opened some people's eyes, we feel good about it."

The Clovis chamber spent about \$8,000 on advertisements, fliers, stickers and a mailing to 30,000 Clovis voters.

The campaign for Measure C was led by the Fresno Chamber of Commerce, which raised almost \$600,000 for its effort but fell short of its original goal of \$800,000 to \$1 million.

The estimated \$1.7 billion Measure C is expected to raise would be divided into three roughly equal shares. It funds more frequent bus service and other transit improvements, improves major streets and highways and provides the county and its 15 cities with street repairs funds.

In Madera County, voters were sending the same message about Measure T, a half-cent road tax that will improve the county's major thoroughfares. With all precincts reporting, the measure passed with nearly three-quarters of voters' support. The measure needed two-thirds approval to pass.

The Madera County measure reinstitutes a half-cent sales tax a year after the previous road tax, Measure A, expired.

"It's a great victory for the cities and the county," said Madera Mayor Rob Poythress. "It's going to pave the way for some really great future developments."

Four years ago, county officials sought voter approval to extend the tax but it fell short.

In 1990, Madera County taxpayers passed Measure A, which expired in October 2005.

Measure T is expected to raise a total of \$213 million over 20 years for Madera County transportation projects.

Local leaders say the measure will add lanes to Avenue 12, Highway 41, Gateway Avenue, Fourth Street, Road 29 and Cleveland Avenue. Money from the measure also will improve interchanges along Highway 99 at Gateway Avenue, Fourth Street, Avenue 12 and Highway 233.

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