

Tuolumne County, Sonora Will Discuss Sales Tax Increase for Roads

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Alex Maclean

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With funding for road maintenance lacking despite California's recent gas tax and vehicle fee increases, Tuolumne County and City of Sonora officials plan to engage the public in a discussion about a possible increase to the local sales-tax rates.

In their responses to the Tuolumne County Civil Grand Jury's report on the deteriorating state of local roads, the county Board of Supervisors and Sonora City Council both indicated that they would further explore the idea.

One of the chief findings of the investigation was that the county will need an additional \$4 million per year for the next two decades to catch up on maintenance and repairs to all local roads, on top of the \$9 million per year that will be available after receiving all of the revenues from the 12-cent per gallon increase to the state's gas tax through Senate Bill 1.

While the county's response agreed with the jury's finding that current funding will not be adequate, the board clarified that the additional amount of money needed per year is \$6.5 million as opposed to \$4 million.

Additional funding from SB 1 would be lost if the majority of voters in the state approve Proposition 6 in the Nov. 6 general election that would repeal the tax.

The board also responded to five additional findings that applied to the county's road network specifically, including that some communities are disadvantaged by the way funding for road maintenance is divided, the oldest roads in the county require more maintenance because they were not built to modern standards, and most privately maintained roads in public subdivisions are not being funded.

There are 610 miles of roads maintained by the county and 27.5 miles maintained by the city, according to the report. They are broken down as a minor arterials, major collectors, minor collectors and local roads.

Minor arterials such as Mono Way and La Grange Road and major collectors such as Parrotts Ferry and Tuolumne roads make up 24 percent of county's road network and are given first priority under the county's policy.

Local roads comprise 56 percent of the county's network and are defined as those that provide direct access to residential properties and other areas not served by arterials or collectors. They have the lowest average Pavement Condition Index rating of between 22 and 32, which is considered poor on a scale of 0 to 100.

The jury reported that 510 subdivision maps have been recorded in the county since 1871, with 71 filed prior to road construction standards adopted since 1952.

There are approximately 131 private subdivisions, such as the gated community of Pine Mountain Lake in Groveland, where the responsibility for funding road maintenance is placed on the residents.

A resolution passed in 1987 required any new subdivision to assume the responsibility of funding road maintenance through what's called a Community Service Agreement that levies an additional property tax on residents in those areas.

The jury determined that 21 of the 107 non-private subdivisions in the county that have the responsibility of funding road maintenance are actively doing so through such agreements, though the county responded that 18 are considered actively funded.

Though the jury noted that an increase in the local sales tax specifically for road maintenance was the simplest option, the possibility of double taxation on those subdivisions that are funding their own road maintenance would need to be addressed.

Several county supervisors said they believed the jury overlooked some issues with state and federal funding that have contributed to the growing maintenance backlog.

District 5 Supervisor Karl Rodefer talked about how the state has diverted revenues from the pre-SB 1 gas tax to plug other holes in the budget as opposed to funding transportation projects as originally intended.

"That money needs to go back," he said. "We tried to get that part of the discussion with SB 1 and failed. The Legislature is just intransigent on that."

District 1 Supervisor Sherri Brennan added that she believed there would have been "a little more informed understanding" of the issue with local roads had the jury read the county's letters to the Legislature prior to SB 1's approval.

Brennan also talked about how the county still shoulders the responsibility of addressing the impact on roads from visitors, but doesn't receive gas-tax revenue from them if they buy fuel elsewhere before coming up.

District 2 Supervisor Randy Hanvelt noted that the problem mentioned by Brennan is more acute in the county because it has more roads per capita to maintain than many urban areas.

Hanvelt also talked about the tenuous nature of ongoing funding from the federal Secure Rural Schools program, or SRS, which provides about \$1 million a year that's split between school and roads.

The program was authorized by Congress in 2000 to benefit counties with a large amount of federal land managed by the U.S. Forest Service that had struggled with reduced revenue due to declining timber harvests since the 1980s.

Congress reauthorized the program for the previous and current fiscal years through Sept. 30, though its future beyond that remains in question.

"That's why it's important we continue to support NaCo (National Association of Counties) and RCRC (Rural County Representatives of California) to go after a permanent solution for SRS," Hanvelt said.

Hanvelt will be part of a delegation of about 40 other elected county officials who will be in Washington, D.C., Wednesday through Friday to advocate for Congress to fully fund the Payments In Lieu of Taxes program, also known as PILT, which is set to expire on Sept. 30.

The program was created by Congress in 1976 to provide funding for counties with nontaxable federal land to compensate for lost property tax revenue and offset costs for county services provided to users of those lands, such as law enforcement, emergency response, search-and-rescue operations, and maintenance to roads and bridges.

About 77 percent of the land in the county is under federal management.

In an op-ed for the National Association of Counties submitted to several major media organizations in the nation's capital last week, Hanvelt stated the county received about \$2.7 million from the PILT program this year .

He noted in the piece that PILT money would be spread thinner if Congress fails to come up with a permanent solution for the Secure Rural Schools program.

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