

LOCAL NEWS

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Local transportation money scarce RTC seeks new method of funding \$40M Metrobase

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By **HEATHER BOERNER**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

The California Transportation Commission voted Thursday against including Santa Cruz's Metrobase project in state funding, and if more isn't found, it could strand riders.

"There are so many ifs and buts in this plan that I have no confidence that

Metrobase will be funded," said Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commissioner Pat Spence, who represents the bus district. "If Metrobase isn't funded, 40,000 bus riders and 8,000 paratransit riders a year could be left on the street. They can't get around without buses."

The \$40 million Metrobase would go into a number of locations on 15 acres in the Harvey West neighborhood. It would accommodate 98 of 175 buses and an administrative center. But the critical piece — and the piece that would strand riders if it weren't completed quickly — is the construction of a large

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compressed natural gas storage tank to fuel the low-emissions buses the California Air Resources Board requires by 2005.

If the tank isn't constructed soon, the district may have to park buses, Metro General Manager Les White has said.

But the Santa Cruz Regional Transportation Commission, at Thursday's meeting, said it was committed to finding at least part of the \$7.8 million Metro expected to get from now-unavailable state transportation money. The commission is considering juggling other transportation projects to assure that the Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit Dis-

trict's Metrobase project can count on at least a portion of the \$7.8 million it was supposed to get from the State Transportation Improvement Program.

"What I think we're saying is that we're going to go back and reshuffle other programs to get Metrobase in there," said Commission Chair Jan Beautz.

The commission will hold a public hearing in the fall at which it will discuss changes to its Regional Transportation Improvement Plan, the plan that explains which projects will be funded in the next few years. Right now, the state transportation commission hasn't funded

Metrobase. But that doesn't mean the commission can't return to the state with a proposal to include it anyway.

State transportation money, in general, appeared to dry up this week; however. The new state budget takes more money from state transportation coffers. Now, the state general fund owes state transportation programs \$5.5 billion.

The state transportation commission won't be releasing transportation funds to any local transportation agencies this year. Santa Cruz County had been promised \$66 million.

Next year, only \$500 million will be available statewide, and then only for safety projects.

"What it comes down to is that (State Transportation Improvement Program money) is not a reliable source of income anymore," Regional Transportation Planner Rachel Moriconi said. "So we have to look elsewhere."

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State Budget Bleeds Transportation Funds

KTC A VM Press 8/18/04

August 5— the California Transportation Commission announced that the State Budget approved by Governor Schwarzenegger will prevent them from releasing any funds to local transportation projects for at least another four months. The budget will also tightly restrict the total number of transportation projects that may be funded in coming years. The state Commission reported that they will only have enough cash to fund \$500 million in safety and emergency

projects on highways statewide; this is less than one quarter of the \$2.2 billion that they had planned to release to a variety of transportation projects statewide this year. At this rate, the unfunded transportation needs in the state are anticipated to grow to \$160 billion by 2010.

Over the past three fiscal years, the State has continually treated transportation like "an ATM for the

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STATE BUDGET

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General Fund," diverting over \$5.5 billion in gasoline sales tax revenues that were dedicated to transportation with the enactment of Proposition 42 and regular gas tax funds away from transportation projects. The result has been delays to projects such as the Highway 1/17 Merge Lanes project as well as over a dozen major roadway repair projects countywide. Though the 2004 State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) that the CTC adopted schedules release of funds for the Highway 1/17 Merge Lanes project in FY05/06, the CTC immediately noted it is unlikely it will even be able to meet the commitments made in the 2004 STIP.

Due to the continued bleeding of transportation funds, the state also decided not to include \$7.8 million for the Transit District's MetroBase operations facility in the 2004 State

Transportation Improvement Program (STIP). The Regional Transportation Commission had asked the state to give back \$7.8 million which the State took away from the MetroBase project in 2002 when the Transit District was unable to meet state deadlines because of site relocation.

The continual raid of transportation funds to bail out the State Budget has made the State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) an unreliable funding source for transportation projects. This is one of the reasons the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission has proposed a new one-half-cent sales tax for the November 2004 ballot. If approved by two-thirds of Santa Cruz County voters, the new sales tax would raise approximately \$577 million to be used to widen Highway 1 with carpool/bus/emergency vehicle lanes between

Santa Cruz and Aptos; improve local streets, sidewalks and bike paths, improve safety on Highway 17, increase transportation options for seniors and persons with disabilities, build a coastal bike/walking path next to the rail line, and build a train station near Watsonville that would link to trains from the San Francisco Bay Area and the rest of the state.

The final impacts of the recently approved State Budget will not be known until trailer bills make it through the legislature and Propositions 68 and 70 related to tribal gaming are decided by voters in November. Also, reauthorization of the federal transportation act could significantly impact the amount of funding available for critical transportation projects in Santa Cruz County.

Let's Get Moving!

by Santa Cruz County Supervisor Ellen Pirie



On Nov. 2, Santa Cruz County voters will be able to start solving transportation problems in our community by enacting a local half-cent sales tax. The sales tax money will be used for several important needs including reducing Highway 1 gridlock, building bike paths and getting seniors to their medical appointments.

No one really likes to pay taxes. But when local tax money is used by local people to solve local problems it somehow seems better.

The Problem

Our four-lane Highway 1 was fine when it was built in the 1950s. The population of the entire county was around 65,000 — which is about the same population as the Watsonville area today.

There was no UCSC, no Cabrillo College, no Capitola Mall or 41st Avenue shopping district. There were miles of farm land between Santa Cruz and Capitola. Santa Cruz was a small, backwater county and getting around was a breeze.

The population of Santa Cruz County has quadrupled in the

past 50 years yet we have made few significant road or traffic improvements in that time.

Now, on average, 110,000 vehicles travel on Highway 1 every day. We need to solve the terrible traffic congestion on the highway and on the adjacent neighborhood streets. We need to stop wasting time and gas sitting in bumper to bumper traffic every morning and evening. We need to stop adding to the air pollution with thousands of idling cars.

We also need ambulances, fire trucks and police to be able to get to emergencies quickly. We need a bus system that works for people besides UCSC students. We need cheap, reliable rides for seniors and the disabled.

We need more bike lanes and a coastal bike and pedestrian trail. We need road repairs and safe routes to schools for the kids.

It would be great if we could simply wait for the State or Federal government to make these improvements. The problem is that we would be waiting forever.

First, the State has already taken \$5.5 billion (yes, BILLION) of transportation money to help solve its budget crisis. And, secondly, the State government has made it clear that even if they had money their priorities are large urban areas and highways serving millions of people.

The Federal government is much the same. We need to solve these problems ourselves or it will only get worse.

The Projects

Here's how the sales tax revenue will be spent. About two-thirds of the money, or about \$363 million, will be used to add a carpool and bus lane (called an HOV lane, which stands for High Occupancy Vehicles) in each direction on Highway 1 between Morrissey Boulevard in Santa Cruz, south to San Andreas Road

in Aptos. These lanes will also allow ambulances, police and fire fighters to get to people in need quickly. There will also be auxiliary lanes to improve merging of traffic at freeway interchanges, soundwalls and landscaping.

As part of the widening project, three new bicycle and pedestrian bridges are proposed to be built over Highway 1 between the Soquel Drive overpass and Rio

widening the highway now we will cut travel time nearly in half. And that's not even in the carpool/bus lane!

In the southbound direction, travel from Ocean Street to San Andreas Road will take 42 minutes without the widening and 14 minutes with it. My personal experience has been that it can take nearly 42 minutes to make that trip now and that we might

who need special help getting around the community for doctor visits, school and other essential trips. Our current system, which is a combination of Lifeline, Metro and taxis, is struggling to meet these needs and desperately needs more money to continue.

Highway 17 will be made safer with about \$6 million of safety projects. An already effective safety measures will also be continued — extra California Highway Patrol enforcement.

Travel by train will be made easier for local residents and visitors, through a joint project with Monterey County to construct a passenger rail station just south of Watsonville in Monterey County at Pajaro Station.

This station would be served by Caltrain and Amtrak service to the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond.

I support the expenditure plan and sales tax measure. It is a compromise, which ensures that transportation is improved for everybody. We cannot continue to ignore the impacts on the safety of our community and the degradation of the quality of life caused by the Highway 1 gridlock. While easing the traffic congestion we can encourage the use of buses and carpools. And the non-highway projects will make Santa Cruz County a better place to live and play.

This plan allows Santa Cruz County residents to decide our transportation priorities, not faceless state officials. We will build those projects that are the most important to us and will have the means to pay for them.

If you would like more information about the sales tax ballot measure or the projects that are proposed, please go to the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission website (www.sccrtc.org). Or get in touch with me at 831-454-2200. □

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del Mar. Exact locations will be decided as the project gets further along in the design phase.

To encourage use of the HOV lanes, new express buses, park and ride lots and alternative transportation programs will be included.

Currently, buses and carpools are stuck in the traffic with everyone else. Why take a bus from Watsonville to Santa Cruz when it is slower and less convenient than driving? This proposal creates an incentive to use alternative transportation because it will be much faster than driving alone.

A traffic analysis of the highway showed that if we do nothing, by 2020 northbound morning traffic will take almost 90 percent longer than it did in 2001. That is nearly an hour from Airport Blvd. to the fishhook. However, by

well be pushing an hour in 2020.

The second largest portion of the revenue — \$112 million — will go to the local cities and the County for road maintenance and transportation improvements. Each year 19 percent of the sales tax money will be distributed based on population. This money can be spent on projects as decided by residents and elected officials to improve streets, bike-ways, sidewalks and other transportation projects.

Another \$23 million, or 4 percent of the total, will create a coastal bike and pedestrian trail along the existing Watsonville to Davenport rail line.

This is a beautiful corridor that will allow folks to ride their bikes or walk without fear of cars or other traffic. An equal amount — \$23 million — will be spent helping seniors and the disabled