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Fred Keeley: A good step toward sustainable transportation

In November of 2004, voters in Santa Cruz County soundly defeated a measure that would have raised the local sales tax by one-half cent for 30 years for the purpose of trying to solve our community's transportation problems. Given that the law requires a two-thirds vote in order to pass such a measure, the 43 percent "yes" vote was a huge loss.

Clearly, traffic congestion, lack of sufficient alternative transportation, poorly maintained roads and insufficient funds to address these and other transportation-related challenges are top priorities for many residents of our community. But, broadly based support for a solution has escaped our community for a very long time.

In the wake of Measure J's defeat, the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission [RTC] decided that it must take a very different approach to finding solutions to our vexing transportation challenges. Therefore, it established the Transportation Funding Task Force [TFTF], a group of nearly 80 community, business, environmental and neighborhood leaders. That was in September 2005.

It was at that point that the RTC asked if I would serve, on a voluntary basis, as the convener of the TFTF. With the support of the RTC's excellent professional staff, and the experience of the RTC's consultant, Eileen Goodwin, a process was developed. Hundreds of people participated in workshops and nearly 600 workbooks were completed either at the workshops or online. That took most of 2006 to complete.

It was then necessary to take those thousands of pages of input, hundreds of hours of meetings, hundreds of e-mails and countless other interactions of the TFTF and put it into a draft plan.

The draft plan itself has three options. First, a very large and expensive solution that includes virtually every recommendation that evidenced significant levels of support during the workshop/workbook phase of this lengthy process. Second, a more modestly priced plan that would make limited progress on nearly every front [highway efficiency, road repair, bus improvements, bike transportation improvements, neighborhood safety and more]. Third, a one-on-one showdown between widening Highway 1 and a package of transportation improvement alternatives. [The plan, and other information on the TFTF can be found at tftaskforce.org].

This draft plan was intended to give the TFTF a starting point for the hard work in front of it. That is the development and adoption of its plan.

Much has been said about how long this process is taking. Much has been said about the most recent fits and starts of the TFTF in getting to an agreed-upon plan. All of that is understandable, but also not a bad thing.

Last Thursday night, the TFTF took a very important step. It met again, this time for nearly three hours. In a very civil manner, the members discussed, debated and finally adopted a set of protocols for how they would proceed in fulfilling the civic duty they agreed to take on in 2005: to develop a broadly supportable transportation funding plan. Now, some may say that doesn't sound like much progress at all. I see it otherwise.

The TFTF, until last Thursday night, was not asked to make any decisions. It had been asked to be part of a process in 2006 that reached out to the community and sought deep, detailed information from the community concerning what the transportation problems are in our neighborhoods, our

community and in this region. The group's members were asked to dig deeper within themselves to discern what solutions could be applied to those problems and how to pay for it all. They have done that.

Now, they are starting the last and most difficult phase of the civic duty that they have agreed to undertake for this community. That is to retain all of the civility and good will that they have built among and between each other and with the community during the past 18 months. Then, with the draft plan as a point of reference, to debate and negotiate their way to a principled transportation funding plan.

As the convener of the TFTF, I am not a member of the TFTF. I have no vote in this matter. I am more accurately described as an air-traffic controller for the TFTF. It is the TFTF members who have the civic duty to work together in the common interest of our community. While there will be disagreements, and moments of deep frustration over the next several weeks, the TFTF has the chance to deliver a legacy product that will benefit this community for decades.

It is my belief that they will rise to that challenge.

Fred Keeley is the county treasurer and tax collector. He has served on the county Board of Supervisors and in the state Assembly.

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