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Sonoma County supervisors float property tax idea for roads

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Sonoma County supervisors Tuesday approved a small addition to the list of county roads targeted for long-term maintenance while signaling support for study of a possible property tax increase to boost road upkeep.

Board members cited county budget pressure and flat state road funding as two of the reasons for the makeshift moves and revenue search. The \$4.5 million currently allocated toward long-term upkeep is woefully short of the \$120 million maintenance backlog saddling the county's 1,382-mile network.

Supervisors tentatively agreed the problem may require a tax increase, possibly in the form of a countywide road maintenance district.

“Politically, it's not an easy thing to take on because it's going to take a huge amount of money to solve,” said Supervisor David Rabbitt. “And it's probably going to come from the citizens of the county.”

The three main taxing options supervisors discussed Tuesday involve a road maintenance district of some form that would require two-thirds approval by voters.

County administrative leaders said they also are studying other options to boost funding, including an increase in hotel bed taxes.

Any tax increase could face an uphill climb, several supervisors said, and would have to show taxpayers progress on other fronts, such as holding down rising retirement costs, one of the key factors of county budget problems.

“We are committed to solving one of our county's toughest challenges,” Supervisor Mike McGuire said, referring to road upkeep. But “it's going to take additional revenue enhancements to be able to deal with this challenge.”

The comments came before an audience including fiscal watchdogs, two supervisorial candidates and advocates of increased county funding for road maintenance.

One of those advocates, Michael Troy, co-founder of the new group Save Our Sonoma Roads, said he and his fellow members “did not start out to get a new tax” and didn't have a stance yet on whether they would back one.

“It may be a solution in the long run,” said Troy, a Penngrove resident. “But our main mission is public education. The county has to make decisions about its priorities.”

Some speakers were sharply critical of any step toward a tax increase, saying the county needed to shift money from other services to roads.

“If you follow the money it shows where the priorities are and it's not roads,” said Robert Williamson, a Mark West-area resident who frequently addresses the board on fiscal management. He pointed to increased spending on health and human services — much of which is state and federal money — and rising pension costs as factors.

“After this conscious reduction (in road funding) you come and say ‘Well, gee, we're going to have to find some special funding mechanism in order to find some longer term funding?’ ” Williamson said. “Roads should not be discriminated against.”

Others said a study of new taxes for roads was warranted.

Any ultimate move will need community support, said Gina Cuclis, a Boyes Hot Springs communication consultant and candidate for the 1st District supervisor's seat that represents Sonoma Valley and eastern Santa Rosa.

“You have to have a messenger to sell it,” Cuclis said.

Santa Rosa Councilwoman Susan Gorin was the other 1st District supervisorial candidate sitting in on the discussion.

In addition to authorizing further study of the tax issue, the board Tuesday increased spending on long-term road maintenance — the county calls it “pavement preservation” — by about \$2.2 million.

Officials did so by tapping a portion of the franchise fees paid by solid waste haulers. The funds could be a continuing source of money to help with roads for the next 16 years, county transportation officials said.

The funding shift allowed the board to add 42 miles to a so-called “priority list” of highly traveled, regionally significant roads targeted for long-term maintenance.

An additional 21 miles could be added to the list in the future if the county finds a new source of funding, supervisors decided.

Combined, the 63 mile additional miles would bring the priority road list to nearly 219 miles, or roughly 16 percent of the county network.

The added miles — representing more than 40 roads — are the same batch the board endorsed in a preliminary vote in October. They include a 5.4-mile stretch of Bennett Valley Road from Grange Road to Warm Springs Road, 8.2 miles of Valley Ford Road from Highway 1 to Tomales Road and 6.1 miles of Graton Road from Bohemian Highway to Highway 116.

Most of the segments are in good shape, and the long-term goal is maintenance efforts to keep them that way, said Phil Demery, the county's transportation and public works director.

The board also approved an additional \$250,000 in solid waste franchise fees to support efforts by landowners and homeowners groups proposing to work on segments of county roads near their property.

Supervisors, however, spent most of the hearing grappling with how to maintain the rest of the road network — the 1,164 miles of county-maintained surfaces that are set to receive only emergency repairs and would ultimately be allowed to fail and become gravel surfaces.

Demery called that scenario the “elephant in the room,” and a “clear source of frustration” to residents. Already, the county's roads have ranked at or near the bottom in terms of pavement condition when compared with other Bay Area counties, according to the Metropolitan Transportation Commission.

“You can't say you're going to maintain 16 percent of the county's roads and say you've solved the problem,” Sebastopol area resident Mike Windsor told the board.

“It really is discouraging me to live in a place where you're going to be writing off my roads.”

Supervisors said they didn't intend to let that happen. “Forty-two miles is a good start but it's not enough,” Chairwoman Shirlee Zane said of the first group of priority road additions, which represent about 3 percent of the county network.

But long-term upkeep of the entire 1,382 miles would cost more than \$100 million annually, money the county doesn't have or come close to getting from state and federal sources. Those sources make up nearly 90 percent of the county's overall 2011-2012 roads budget of \$41.6 million, including bridge and redevelopment dollars, county transportation officials said.

Within that total figure, state funding from gas tax revenues has remained flat. It is allocated using a formula unchanged since the early 1990s. And support from the county's general fund has dropped from \$7.8 million in 2008-2009 to \$5.3 million in the current fiscal year.

Meanwhile, the county has struggled to keep pace with emergency repairs, spending up to \$1.5 million a year simply filling potholes.

“We have 84 to 85 percent of our road system that is deteriorating before our very eyes,” Demery said. “This is not something the general fund can remedy. And it's not necessarily something that a sales tax or gas tax can remedy.”

Supervisors said it called for a “long-term solution.”

“This is not a new issue,” said Rabbitt. “We will be asking for your patience and we will be asking for your help.”

Supervisors are set to return to the issue, including a discussion of tax increases to support roads, in the spring.