

Fight begins on possible sales tax hike

Funds could pay for new rail, bus lines, road improvements



By [Joshua Stewart](#) | 3:14 p.m. Jan. 30, 2016



The San Diego Association of Governments is working on a ballot measure for a sales tax to raise money for decades worth of infrastructure projects. Organizations including a coalition of labor, environmental and transportation advocacy groups, as well as county Republicans, are trying to influence the measure and persuade voters. *James Skovmand*

- [□](#)
- [□](#)
- [□](#)
- [✉](#)
- [👍](#)

San Diego — As soon as the San Diego Association of Governments announced it wanted public input for a ballot measure that would help pay for decades of infrastructure projects, political battle lines were drawn.

ADVERTISING
ADVERTISING

If people are going to pay an additional half-cent sales tax, their money should go to improving mass transit systems, and making the air cleaner and streets safer, according to the Quality of Life Coalition of 20 organizations representing labor, environmental, health and transportation interests said.

Hold on a minute, don't even think about it, countered San Diego Republicans. There shouldn't even be a tax, no matter what it pays for, they say.

"We're opposed to it already, as it runs afoul of our standing rule against tax and fee increases," Tony Krvaric, chairman of the Republican Party of San Diego County said.

Based on what the November ballot measure includes (or doesn't include) both groups are pledging to use their political muscle to persuade voters before polls open. The emerging fight has the potential change the region's transportation systems, open spaces, and real estate development along with the countywide sales tax rate, which currently stands at 8 cents on the dollar.

SANDAG, a regional planning organization, is honing a proposal could raise sales taxes by as much as half a cent in order to fund parts of a long-term infrastructure plan. That calls for a series of new trolley lines, a more comprehensive bus network, more express lanes on freeways, skyway gondolas, and bike- and pedestrian-friendly investments, among other facets.

Those plans are expected to cost as much as \$204 billion, and funds would come from federal, state and local governments. San Diego County Supervisor Ron Roberts, the newly-named chairman of SANDAG's board, said putting a measure on the ballot is his top priority.

The regional planning organization recently began an outreach effort to figure out which of the projects could gain support from at least a two-thirds majority of the voters it needs to pass the tax increase. For the groups interested in the ballot measure, they have to accomplish two feats. First, they need to get SANDAG to put a measure they support onto the ballot, then they must convince voters to back it.

The Quality of Life Coalition says it wants the measure to focus on mass transit projects.

"We'd like to see, essentially, that the San Diego region, cannot spend new money on old ways of thinking," said Monique Lopez, the policy advocate at the Environmental Health Coalition, one of the groups a part of the larger Quality of Life Coalition.

"Much investment has been focused on very freeway-centric planning. Adding lanes to freeways, in the long term, doesn't relieve congestion. Congestion moves back to the levels prior to that" lane expansion.

"We really want to partner with SANDAG only if it provided clean air, safer streets and good jobs," Lopez said, later adding that her group has done some of the legwork SANDAG would need to get voter approval.

Just as strongly, county Republicans are opposing any infrastructure project funded by a sales tax increase, Krvaric said.

“Any countywide tax increase that requires a two-thirds vote is doomed with the Republican party in opposition,” he said.

He said that some of the plan's components like the skyway gondola are “laughable” and “deserves to go down in defeat.”

“Ridiculous idea. taxpayer money shouldn’t be spent on trophy projects for an outgoing supervisor — 99% of San Diego County residents will never ride that,” he said in an email.

Roberts has championed a network of one to three gondola lines through the San Diego area. An architect by trade, the term-limited supervisor views the the novel transit system as a way to move as many people per minute as buses. He views it as a solution to building up transit without taking up much space on the ground, and a way to quickly move both residents and tourists to important hubs in the region.

SANDAG this past week began soliciting county residents for input on their biggest long-term planning priorities. The outreach effort includes teleconferences, meetings and an online survey.

