Contra Costa County Links Transportation Tax to Growth Management

■ **ERIC S. ZELL**

Contra Costa County, located in the east San Francisco Bay Area, has found an extra $807 million in transportation funds, thanks to win/win thinking that forged a coalition of unlikely partners and helped the partnership work toward a creative solution to the county's transportation funding gap.

The new funding comes from Measure C, a 20-year, half-cent sales tax earmarked for a number of highway projects, public transit extensions and improvements, bike and pedestrian trails, various transportation management programs, and local street maintenance and improvements. The tax was approved by the county's voters last November, while only two years before, a similar tax was firmly rejected.

What made the difference?

This time around, the voters were looking at a detailed list of transportation projects and programs that was developed from the recommendations of four broad-based, subregional transportation committees. Most important, these transportation improvements were linked to a growth management program. People from a wide range of interests—developers, environmentalists, representatives of business groups and citizen groups—had been drafted to develop and campaign for both the transportation and growth management aspects of 1988's Measure C.

No Other Way Out

Contra Costa is a large rapidly growing county with 18 incorporated cities and a population of more than 753,000. It has the dubious distinction of being the location for some of the San Francisco Bay Area's most dramatic commuter tangles. Although the region's Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system penetrates the western and central parts of the county, funding has not been available to build long-promised extensions into the eastern portion of the county. Despite very aggressively searching and eventually securing considerable state and federal funds, the county has fallen far short of the funding required to meet its transportation needs.

When the first Measure C was placed on the ballot in 1986, its supporters were confident. Recent local polls had tagged transportation as a major problem. The county and its 18 cities had forged a generally acceptable spending plan and a list of priorities. Elsewhere in the Bay Area, Santa Clara County had passed a similar sales tax the year before, and neighboring Alameda County was shooting for its own sales tax vote in November. The time seemed ripe. Spearheaded by the county and supported by local city officials and Contra Costa County's Mayors Conference, the Measure C campaign received generous contributions from developers anxious to see traffic woes relieved.

Few transportation sales tax advocates were worried about the opposition campaign led by Residents for a Better Contra Costa, a lightly funded citizen advocacy coalition made up of homeowner, environmental, and senior citizen groups and headed by an activist named Byron Campbell. No one was overly worried, that is, until the votes were tallied. The measure was defeated by more than 7,000 ballots (or six percentage points).

Despite the disappointing vote results, a sales tax remained one of the few approaches available for raising much-needed transportation money. In the early 1980s, the state had set a formula-based cap on local government expenditures. Most cities and counties, already at their limits, found it impossible to raise additional transportation funds. Governor George Duekmejian, elected in 1982, had made it clear that he would not back any new taxes and expressed an unwillingness to raise taxes that traditionally supported transportation programs—gas taxes, bridge tolls, and truck weighing fees.

State legislation, however, encouraged and enabled county transportation sales taxes. Senate Bill 878, which was sponsored by Senator Dan Boatwright and became law in 1986, permits individual counties in the nine-county San Francisco Bay region to impose a sales tax for transportation funding. Another statewide bill, which was sponsored by Senator Waddie Deddah and became law in 1987, permits county sales taxes to raise money for transportation and allows counties to form transportation authorities before they have special transportation funding mechanisms in place.

A Better Idea

Picking up the pieces, Contra Costa's transportation advocates went to work again. A Transportation Partnership Commission was formed with cities contributing funds, the county providing an executive, and the Contra Costa Council, a coalition of business and developer interest, providing secretarial help. Composed entirely of city and county elected officials, the 11-member commission held its first meeting in September 1987. It worked closely with the county's originally three, then four, subregional transportation committees. The voting bodies of these committees are made up of local elected officials appointed by their city councils, but they also include nonvoting representatives from various transportation agencies and the interested public.

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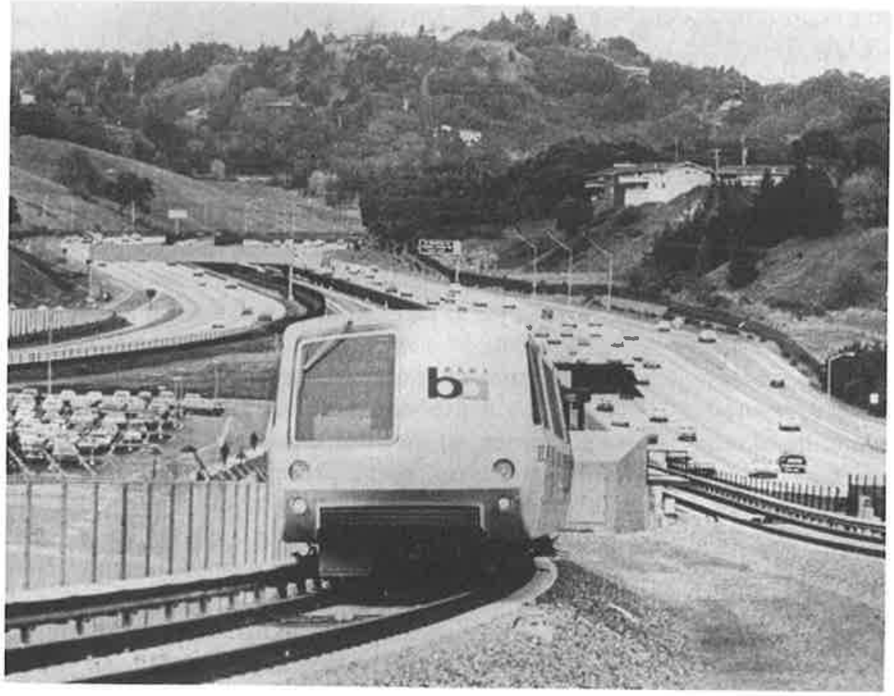


Contra Costa County's Measure C linked transportation improvements—such as the extension of BART—with growth management programs.

Behind the scenes, supporters of the failed measure were analyzed what had gone wrong. "We knew we were going to have to change the approach if we were going to succeed," said Bill Gray, president of Smith, Gray and Company, a transportation and governmental relations consulting firm that had provided technical advice in the first campaign.

In a meeting with three members of the new commission—its chair, city of Concord Mayor Ron Mullin; a member, county supervisor Sunne McPeak; and the commission's executive, Barbara Neustadter—Gray proposed a platform he felt would unite people from both sides of Measure C. After all, Byron Campbell's Residents for a Better Contra Costa opposed Measure C as it had appeared on the 1986 ballot, but were not against transportation solutions. Their concern was that the measure was growth inducing, developer dominated, and poorly thought out. McPeak, a high-profile supervisor with a statewide reputation, had been pushing a growth management approach to land use and infrastructure issues for years. Gray proposed linking McPeak's growth management concept to a clearly defined allocation of funds from the half-cent transportation sales tax. A revised Measure C could include a clearly delineated growth management element.

The trio was enthusiastic, while other elected officials and city managers reacted cautiously but favorably to the idea. Campbell and his citizens advocacy group were intrigued and pleased with the idea of linking a transportation sales tax to growth management. The groundwork was in place for a cooperative effort from people with widely varying views.

The Transportation Partnership Commission needed an advisory committee to do the draft work on a revised Measure C. The county allocated the funds necessary for such a committee and extended Neustadter's duties to include staffing it. "We decided we needed every point of view on this new advisory committee," said Gray. "We gathered representatives from the League of Women Voters, developer groups, the Sierra Club, the Coalition of Business and Labor, chambers of commerce, the county Office on Aging, the county planning commission, farm groups, the board of realtors, the Building Industry Association, homeowners' associations, and transportation groups. It was a real cross section."

By late fall of 1987, a notably diverse 26-member advisory committee chaired by Byron Campbell was ready for action on the matter of a new Measure C. To set a structure for its work, the committee adopted a six-point Statement of Principles:

1. The quality of life for Contra Costa residents and the maintenance of a healthy economy depend on three elements—a balanced transportation network of highways, local streets, and public transit; growth management; and regional planning.

2. A comprehensive transportation and growth management process, if it is to successfully reduce traffic congestion, must have public input. The four subregional transportation committees and the citizen advisory committee to the Partnership Commission should be used to provide this input.

3. State and federal contributions are insufficient to meet Contra Costa's transportation needs. A retail sales tax increase earmarked for transportation improvements is the only realistic gap funding method available.

4. The committee's transportation improvement and growth management expenditure plan will focus on alleviating existing traffic congestion through funding major regional projects and the establishment of a transportation and growth management process.

5. Transportation planning and growth management will assure that new growth pays for the facilities required to meet the demands resulting from that growth. The planning and management process will be countywide, without depriving localities of their authority over land use and the establishment of performance standards for such public facilities and services as police protection or water supply.

6. A complementary, but separate, ballot measure will provide for the acquisition and preservation of open space.

Supporters of a revised Measure C had a strategy: Get the committee to focus on points of agreement rather than on differences. "Instead of voting on issues, we tried to build consensus," Campbell explained. "We could see the advantages of the program—developers were interested in road improvements, environmentalists wanted to preserve open space, the League was interested in regional planning, and the homeowners wanted growth management. We supported each other's agendas."

"We really had one common goal," said Gray, "to solve transportation problems. Sometimes we had to stop and refocus to keep ourselves on track in moving toward that goal. But we did it. It was an amazing process." Gray, whose firm had been retained by the county as consultant to the advisory committee, saw his role as a combination of catalyst, technical adviser, and—if issues began to get side-tracked—goal monitor.

The four subregional transportation

MEASURE C GROWTH MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

The Growth Management Program seeks to achieve a cooperative, countywide process for growth management, while maintaining local authority over land use and the establishment of the performance standards called for in item 3 of the program (see below). A portion of sales tax revenues has been earmarked for local street maintenance and improvement. To receive its share of these funds, a jurisdiction must do the following:

1. Adopt a growth management element of its General Plan to be applied in the development review process. The growth management element must include traffic level of service standards (see item 2 below) and performance standards based on local criteria (see item 3 below).

2. Adopt traffic level of service standards keyed to types of land use, as follows:

Land Use	Level of Service*
Rural	Low C
Semirural	High C
Suburban	Low D
Urban	High D
Central Business District	Low E

3. Adopt performance standards based on local criteria for the following public facilities or services:
   a. fire protection
   b. police protection
   c. parks
   d. sanitary facilities
   e. water
   f. flood control

4. Adopt a development mitigation program to ensure that new growth pays its share of the costs associated with it.

5. Participate in a multijurisdictional planning process to reduce the cumulative regional impacts of developments.

6. Develop a five-year capital improvements program to ensure achievement and maintenance of the traffic level of service standards (see item 2 above) and the facilities/services performance standards (see item 3 above).

7. Address housing options and job opportunities as related to transportation demand on a city, subregional, and countywide basis.

8. Adopt a transportation systems management ordinance or take alternative steps to reduce single-occupant automobile travel.

Level of service (los) ratings range from "A" for free-flowing conditions to "F" for saturated conditions.

committees came up with transportation project lists for their areas which they turned over to the Partnership Commission. Developing the growth management component—a more difficult task—was taken on by the Transportation Advisory Committee. Small informal subcommittees, composed of advisory committee members with the most conflicting views, were often split off from the full group to hammer out the tough points. If opposing interests could reach consensus, it was reasoned, they could probably bring back a proposal acceptable to the rest of the group.

Neustadter, known for her skill at easing strains among advocates with divergent points of view, helped the process along. She also tried to make sure both parts of the measure would mesh with procedures of the county and city.

The Improved Measure C

The committee thrashed out an eight-point growth management program (see feature box) tied to a $155.5 million fund earmarked for local street maintenance and improvements. The funds would be allocated by means of a carefully worked out formula to local jurisdictions that met the program's growth management guidelines.

The commitment to acquiring and preserving open space—item 6 in the advisory committee's Statement of Principles—emerged as Measure AA: a $225 million bond issue for acquisition of regional open space, shoreline, and parks. Because transportation funds cannot legally be spent on the acquisition of open space in California (except in rural counties), the open space program had to be separated from Measure C, but it was considered as an important partner to the transportation and growth management endeavor.

In late spring of 1988, the new Measure C was ready. The advisory committee presented its package of 1 transportation projects, five transportation management programs, and the eight-point growth management plan to the Transportation Partnership Commission. The commission approved the package in early June, and all its advocates set their sights on securing a place for Measure C on the November 1988 ballot.

Then began the long, arduous process of obtaining support from the county's cities—the toughest part of the Measure C campaign according to Campbell. Unlike the top-down development of the 1986 plan, which had been initiated by county officials and filtered through city officials before being brought before the public, the development of the 1988 plan was in the form of an inverse pyramid: initiated by interest groups and the public before being brought to elected officials. These officials needed to be convinced. Measure C advocates were on the road almost every night of the week, sometimes attending as many as three council meetings in an evening across the sprawling county.

Neustadter, despite her countless hours presenting the plan to councils and working on revisions, maintains that local officials recognized the revised Measure C from the start as a far more workable plan than the first. "I think this one made more sense to people," said Neustadter. "We had larger projects, more programs. They were keyed to what the local jurisdictions were doing."

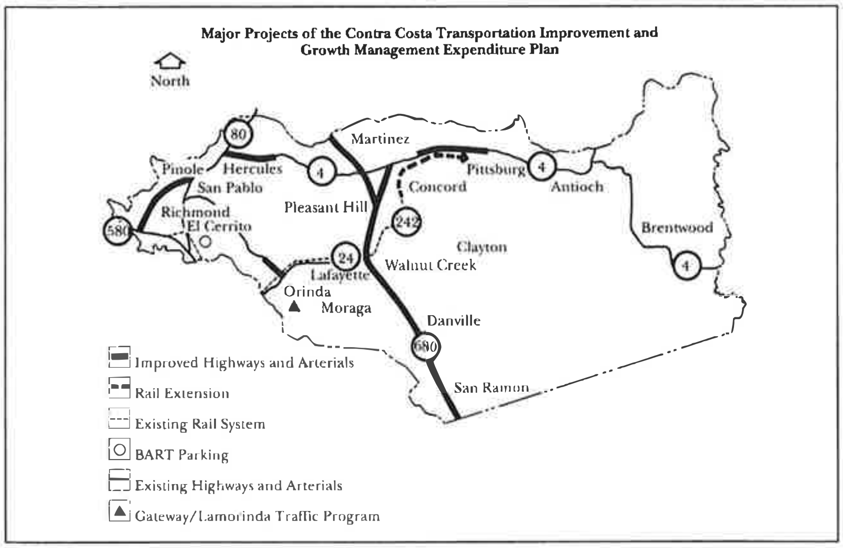
When each local council had completed the process of disassembling and examining every piece of the proposed programs, Measure C emerged revised but basically intact. Measure AA, the open space bond proposal, was making the rounds concurrently, and its proponents endeavored to stack the measures consecutively on meeting agendas to emphasize their compatibility.

While cities reviewed the plan, a newly formed campaign committee composed of private sector and public interest groups hired Ross Communications as campaign consultant to gear up for the November election. Smith, Gray and Company was retained as consultant to the Measure C campaign.

Campaign costs for the revised measure

MEASURE C TRANSPORTATION PROJECTS AND PROGRAMS

	Allocations (Millions of Dollars)
Highways and Arterials	
Interstate 680 Corridor	$100.0
North Richmond/Interstate 80 Bypass	70.0
Route 4 (east)	80.0
Route 4 (west)	45.0
Gateway/Lamorinda Traffic Program	19.0
Major Arterials—Southwest Region	13.6
Camino Pablo (San Pablo Dam Road Corridor)	4.5
Transit	
Rail Extension—from Concord to North Concord and Eastern Contra Costa	178.0
Contra Costa Regional Commuterway	46.0
BART Parking	5.5
Trails	
Regional Bicycle and Pedestrian Trails	3.0
Programs	
Elderly and Handicapped Transit Service	25.9
Local Street Maintenance and Improvements	155.5
Carpools, Vanpools, and Park and Ride Lots	8.6
Bus Transit Improvements and Coordination	42.4
Regional Transportation and Growth Management Planning	10.0
TOTAL:	807.0



Major Projects of the Contra Costa Transportation Improvement and Growth Management Expenditure Plan

were considerably less than in 1986, pleasing the developers that were footing most of the bill. Campaign materials highlighted the diversity and inclusiveness of the makeup of the advisory committee and the cooperative process that had been used to develop the new plan. One brochure stressed that Byron Campbell, leader of the opposition in 1986, was an enthusiastic proponent of the revised Measure C. Groups and individuals normally on opposite sides of the fence cosigned letters of support: the League of Women Voters cosigned with the Contra Costa Taxpayers Association and U.S. Representative George Miller (D-Calif.) and Republican Assemblyman Bill Baker jointly urged voters to approve Measure C.

"It was a unique campaign," and Gray. "And all the hard work was rewarded at the ballot box." On November 8, Measure C passed by an impressive 15 percentage points. Its companion, Measure AA, which required a two-thirds vote, was also approved.

On April 1, 1989, the half-cent sales tax went into effect. The Transportation Partnership Commission, recently renamed the Contra Costa Transportation Commission, directs the use of the new funds. The tax is expected to bring benefits in excess of the direct funds raised because the state gives special funding consideration to what it calls selfhelp counties. "This gives us leverage for additional state and federal transportation funding," said Neustadter.

"We're all really proud of the success of this effort," said Gray, looking back over the many months of hard work. "It was a win/win campaign for everyone involved. Many counties in the state are now looking to our program as a model for dealing with their transportation funding needs."

As individual counties consider following Contra Costa's lead, the state is also looking in that direction. Assemblyman Richard Katz has proposed a $0.05 state gas tax increase for transportation projects, with the funds to be allocated to localities on the basis of their growth management programs.

Meanwhile, the initiator of it all, Contra Costa County, will have an extra $807 million over the next two decades to spend on solutions to its transportation problems.

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