

# 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 cam-

paigned 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 Deukmejian, 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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