



THE PRESS
BRENTWOOD • DISCOVERY BAY • OAKLEY • ANTIOCH

Contra Costa County likely to levy sales tax proposal on November ballot

Kyle Szymanski | Aug 13, 2020 Updated Aug 13, 2020

The Contra Costa Board of Supervisors is likely to levy a 20-year, half-cent sales tax proposal on the November ballot to make health and other critical resources more accessible and available.

The potential countywide measure, which is contingent upon the expected passage of a senate bill by late August, would generate an annual \$81 million for community health centers, early childhood services and other essential county resources.

The supervisors will only move forward with the idea if Sen. Steve Glazer's Senate Bill 1349, which would authorize the tax and allow it to pass with a majority vote, is signed into law by Aug. 24, the county's deadline for avoiding an estimated \$100,000 to \$200,000 in ballot printing costs.

The ordinance to move the proposal forward was approved in a 4-1 vote, with District 2 Supervisor Candace Andersen dissenting.

"This is an imperfect tool, but it is something that can help us," District 3 Supervisor Diane Burgis said. "Our communities (in District 3) don't depend as much on sales tax because there just isn't as much retail and other opportunities to put money into sales tax. So I see

this as an opportunity for East County to possibly benefit from some of the spending they do in other communities.”

Andersen noted that she had concerns about asking residents for additional funds when many are struggling financially during the pandemic.

A similar Los Angeles County measure was estimated to cost residents between \$25 and \$65 a year, said District 1 Supervisor John Gioia.

“I still have serious, serious concerns about imposing a sales tax when we are in the middle of a global pandemic, and we are seeing families’ household incomes depleted significantly,” Andersen said.

A county sales tax measure ad hoc committee working group, comprising just over 20 public health, nonprofit and labor stakeholders, concluded that the tax is needed for a variety of reasons, including increasing accessibility and availability to health resources, like the county hospital that serves as the health care safety net for vulnerable populations: interpersonal violence prevention; early childhood services; and expanding the number of eligibility workers who aid those seeking government assistance.

The group found that the COVID-19 pandemic has only increased the need for such resources, and many service providers themselves are struggling.

An April report determined that 40% of county workers face a high risk of unemployment, with 84% deemed “not essential,” 62% unable to work from home, and 40% who are not salaried employees.

At the same time, the county hospital faces a \$32 million budget gap, likely to increase future costs and may force health programs to close.

Other resources, including alcohol and substance-abuse treatment providers, interpersonal violence prevention services and legal advocates, are struggling to operate against the rising day-to-day costs, the group found.

An estimated 17,900 county children, ages 0 to 5 years, who are eligible for subsidized child care cannot access it due to low supply. Additionally, 7,000 to 10,000 children have unmet mental health needs, according to county health provider reports.

“Even before COVID-19, we knew there was an increased need for funding in those areas,” Gioia said. “Those needs have gotten even greater during COVID.”

June polling of 666 county voters likely to submit a ballot found that the measure would be approved, 66% to 28%, with a host of priorities receiving broad support, including preventing child and elder abuse, expanding access to mental health care, afterschool programming, substance abuse programs and job training.

“This measure is as well positioned as it could be in the context of a rapidly changing environment,” said Lucia Del Puppo, a representative of FM3 Research, which conducted polling on the proposed measure. “I can’t guarantee voters’ attitudes won’t change, but at this point in time the measure does appear to be well positioned and viable for November.”

County residents, however, expressed mixed reactions prior to the board’s vote, with three of about eight public speakers adamantly against the measure during a recent virtual meeting.

“We are looking at increases in so many areas already. We just can’t take it,” said one county resident who didn’t state her name. “I would like the county to look at their own funds and what they already have, and to relocate and look where things can be managed more properly.”

Another county resident, however, said the additional resident resources are sorely needed.

“Our county and the most vulnerable people in our county are desperately in need of access to healthcare and social services,” she said.

If approved, the tax would kick in April 2021.

For complete polling results and information about the proposed measure, visit <https://bit.ly/31PNAAC>.