

Measure for Measures: What Ballot Measures Mean for Transportation in the Golden State



Elizabeth L. Cousins (Partner, Nossaman LLP, WTS Los Angeles Legislative Chair), Photo © John Livzey, 2017

It is unprecedented. Historically, California is renowned for its trend-setting ballot measures. From the revolutionary Proposition 13 in 1978 to universally lauded Measure R in 2008, California ballot measures substantively change lives in Southern California, while often serving as bellwethers for national politics. The November election proved to be no exception.

According to the Los Angeles Times, “Los Angeles voters are being asked to pay more for the services that shape the region’s quality of life. There is a parcel tax, a bond and sales tax increase on the countywide portion of the ballot, plus a bond to build housing for the homeless and three other measures in the city of Los Angeles, two parcel taxes in districts within the city, and various policy, bond and tax measures in other cities within LA County as well.”

In November’s election there were 17 statewide measures on the ballot in California, giving California the longest ballot in the nation. There were also more than 650 local measures throughout the state. Some California counties even advised voters to add postage to mail-in ballots, as normal first-class postage wouldn’t suffice. Naturally, transportation figured prominently on the ballot. And it’s no accident that the ballot contained numerous transportation measures. Consistent with the national trend, states are trying to compensate for a lack of federal transportation funding. So much so, in fact, that approximately one-third of all California counties had ballot measures this election to increase sales tax to fund transportation. So, what measures are most critical for Southern California transportation and how did they fare?

Proposed by Metro, **Measure M** asked voters to approve a new ½-cent sales tax and continue a sunseting ½-cent sales tax (Measure R) “to improve freeway traffic flow/safety; repair potholes/sidewalks; repave local streets; earthquake-retrofit bridges; synchronize signals; keep senior/disabled/student fares affordable; expand rail/subway/bus systems; improve job/school/airport connections; and create jobs...”

Slated to run for the next 40 years, Measure M would provide an estimated \$860 million per year and add 465,690 new jobs regionally, among its many other transportation-related and quality-of-life benefits. Measure M funds also promise to advance many projects including the Airport Regional Connector and Green Line Extension, the Crenshaw/LAX Light Rail Track Enhancement Project, the East San Fernando Valley Transit Corridor, the Orange Line BRT Connector to the Gold Line, the Gold Line Rail Extension: Foothill to Claremont, the Purple Line Rail Subway Extension: Century City West to Westwood/VA Hospital, and many, many more. In addition, Measure M addresses bicycling and walking (especially the first/last-mile connection to transit), Metrolink, Complete Streets, fare subsidies, ADA paratransit, and precious maintenance funding.

But Measure M also had its negatives. An inherently regressive tax (all sales taxes are), Measure M will cost the average voter between \$25-\$65 annually. In addition, some jurisdictions—like the southeast cities of Huntington Park, South Gate, Paramount, Bellflower, and Artesia—fear that the project that benefits their area is too far down on Metro’s list. Finally, some voters also want funds to go to freeway widening.

Needing a two-thirds supermajority to pass, Metro and Measure M carried the day, passing by a vote of 70% to 30%.

But Measure M was by no means alone in the pursuit of secure transportation funding. Similar ½-cent sales tax measures also graced ballots in San Diego County, Sacramento County, and Ventura County. Though the details differ slightly for each measure, many followed the structure of Measure M. The results, however, followed a very different route.

The San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) proposed **Measure A**. Also a ½-cent sales tax, Measure A would have funded public transit, biking, and walking projects. But it also promised to fund highway expansions as well. Opposed by several progressive and environmental groups—arguing it wouldn’t do enough to reduce greenhouse gases—Measure A failed to pass by a vote of 57% to 43%.

In Sacramento, the Sacramento Transportation Authority’s **Measure B** was also a ½-cent sales tax that was expected to raise \$3.6 billion over 30 years. What made Measure B unique was that the lion’s share of its revenue (60%) was dedicated to the maintenance and repair of local roadways, known as a “fix-it-first” provision. The measure then promised to fund transit, regional highways, and senior and disabled transportation. Evidently, the mix proved less than desirable for state capital residents. Voters defeated Measure B by a 66% to 34% vote.

The Ventura County Transportation Commission put **Measure AA** before county voters. Measure AA was another ½-cent sales tax for 30 years that promised to raise \$70 million annually. Addressing numerous quality-of-life transportation issues, Measure AA sought to do everything from fix potholes, repave streets, and repair bridges to protect waterways and beaches from polluted runoff. Ventura County voters, however, were not impressed and vetoed Measure AA. It fell to a 57% to 43% tally.

It is unprecedented to have so many transportation-funding measures on a ballot. However, this may become the new normal. As federal funding and gas-tax revenues continue to shrink, states must fend for themselves and generate funding however they can. As a result, ballot measures that ask seemingly very little from individual residents, yet deliver critical infrastructure and infrastructure improvements, will probably be a part of our election-day future for many years to come.

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