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Left out in the cold *Maricopa gets shut out of future transportation plans*

By ADAM GAUB, Managing Editor

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A plan for a one-cent increase in sales tax for Arizona to provide for future transportation needs throughout the state has left out major projects affecting Maricopa.



File photo, Development Services Director Brent Billingsley

Development Services Director Brent Billingsley brought the update to the Maricopa City Council at its May 21 issue, informing both the council and the public that area projects once tied to Gov. Janet Napolitano's one-cent sales tax initiative had vanished from the final draft of the plan. The plan would go before voters in November and would set funding for priority transportation projects across the state for the next three decades.

"None of the projects that were in there involving Maricopa are in there anymore," Billingsley said. "This is vital ... and it is a grave situation."

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Billingsley received an advance copy of the final report last week, which was prepared by the TIME Coalition - Transportation and Infrastructure Moving Arizona's Economy - group, as part of the governor's initiative. Formed in February 2007, the goal of the coalition - which is comprised of businesses, economic development groups and other intra-governmental organizations - was to assess the greatest needs for Arizona's transportation infrastructure for its future.

While Billingsley said projects such as improvements to Arizona 347, Interstate 8 and other potential corridors that would benefit Maricopa were initially considered, they were scrapped abruptly before the final report was issued.

Ongoing studies affecting the area, such as the Hidden Valley I-10 and I-8 Framework study, remain months from completion and may not have received proper consideration in this planning process, Billingsley said.

Billingsley said there is little time to impact any change on the report, but any hopes for that would sit with getting in front of the State Transportation Board.

"We've got to get in front of that state board and make a passionate plea," he said, urging citizens to write and call to their state representatives in the Legislature, on the State Transportation Board and to the governor's office. "If something can get fixed, it's got to happen in the next (two) weeks."

The governor's initiative has come under some scrutiny since the announcement of a deal struck by the TIME Coalition and the Home Builders Association, mediated in part by Napolitano.

Connie Wilhelm, president of the Home Builders Association of Central Arizona, wrote in a May 6 memo to the governor that the HBACA would publicly support the TIME Coalition's proposed projects along with the one-cent sales tax if Napolitano would agree to removing the community benefit assessment district and development impact fee portions of the financing portion of the plan. Napolitano agreed to such an offer, which would also see HBACA contribute \$100,000 to the TIME Coalition's signature gathering efforts to place the initiative on the ballot in the fall.

The current initiative proposal budgets a projected \$42 billion in revenues from the sales tax hike that would fund the 30-year transportation plan. To get the initiative on the ballot, the TIME Coalition needs approximately 154,000 signatures of registered voters by July 3 - a tight turnaround time for such a measure.

The Phoenix-based Libertarian think-tank Goldwater Institute's Chairman Tom Patterson said the governor's plan is flawed, and unfairly punishes some parts of the state.

"The sales tax should be a last resort for road building," Patterson told the Arizona Daily Star earlier this month. "It's regressive, it taxes people who never use roads, and it stifles the economy. The right mix for transportation funding includes privatized projects."

Hidden Valley study project manager Bob Hazlett, or the Maricopa Association of Governments, said public-private partnerships were a mechanism for funding that could be used for major projects in the study area - which encompasses Maricopa, Casa Grande and the Maricopa County cities of Buckeye and Goodyear.

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