

Group confident voters will OK transit tax

by **Glen Creno** - May. 31, 2008 12:00 AM
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Persuading voters to agree to a tax increase when the economy is wobbly and people are losing their homes and jobs may seem futile.

But the group, the Transportation & Infrastructure Moving AZ's Economy, which is trying to put a \$42.6 billion transportation-improvement package on the November ballot, says it's up to the task.

Its strategy: a multimedia campaign that focuses on the frustration of increasing congestion and the role transportation plays in the growth of the state and its economy.

The group is already talking up the plan across the state, trying to gather the 153,365 signatures needed to put the plan and its 1-cent sales-tax increase on the ballot.

It expects to meet that goal by the July 3 deadline and plans to more aggressively promote the initiative later in the summer with TV and radio ads and direct mail.

Opponents say it will be tough convincing voters that a tax increase is the best way to attack **Arizona**' transportation needs.

"This one is asking people to raise the sales tax when the economy is very shaky," said Steve Voeller, president of the Arizona Free Enterprise Club. "It's a pretty steep hill to climb. Voters will be skeptical."

But backers of the proposal point to the state's pressing demand for new roads and transit and what they call a looming funding

crisis.

"We're pretty confident people will see the connection between their lives and improved transportation," said Martin Schultz, a lobbyist for Pinnacle West Capital Corp., parent of Arizona Public Service Co., and a spokesman for the TIME coalition, the group pushing the transportation plan and the media campaign.

Pushing the proposal

TIME representatives are traveling the state to explain the proposal to **business** and government groups and answer questions. Experts say it's crucial to get these groups to buy into the plan so they feel like a part of it and are more likely to vigorously push it.

TIME also expects to launch a Web site sometime next month promoting the plan.

Tom Ziemba of Ziemba Waid Public Affairs, the Phoenix consulting and lobbying firm handling both the signature gathering and the media campaign for the measure, estimated it would be a "multimillion" dollar advertising budget. TIME would pay for the

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"This is about people's lives. It's not like a typical bond election where someone wants to raise money for a new sewer line," Ziembra said.

Voeller said his organization is still deciding whether to mount a formal campaign against the proposal, which is called the TIME Act.

He said there should be a thorough debate about how to fund transportation in the state and rejected the idea that TIME's plan is the only way to go. The penny tax would take effect in January 2010 and run for 30 years.

Commuters have mixed opinions. Some oppose the tax increase for reasons varying from higher costs of everyday living to worries about how the money would be spent.

Deanna Olsen, who commutes by bus from Avondale to her downtown Phoenix job as a phone-company dispatcher, said previous tax increases for transportation have failed to deliver on promises. "People are already struggling to make ends meet, but my bottom line is I don't trust government to do what they say they will do," she said.

But others, like Michael Hester, think the extra penny increase is worth it.

Hester, a data-processing consultant who commutes from Wittmann to downtown Phoenix, said he'd like to see rail service to venues like University of Phoenix Stadium, freeway improvements, even a fix-up of Grand Avenue, his commuting route. "I think it's a great idea," he said.

Thus far, opponents have criticized the proposal for the size of the tax increase, too

much emphasis on transit and not enough reliance on the growing trend of using public-private partnerships to fund new transportation projects. The proposal suggests creating a fund to jump-start state participation in such partnerships but not as the primary funding source.

State Rep. Russell Pearce, R-Mesa, said this week that he is trying to put together a competing plan of a half-cent increase in the state sales tax over 20 years to fund only roads, not transit.

Earning voters' trust

The key to earning voters' trust is making sure they understand the package, said Rod Diridon, executive director of California-based Mineta Transportation Institute, which has conducted research on effective transportation campaigns.

Diridon says growing worries about climate change and the outrage over high gas prices may work in TIME's favor. Transit systems are part of their plan.

Also, he said, the presidential election

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should bring a high voter turnout, which should work in its favor, too. He said direct mail is effective in these campaigns when the mailings carry endorsements from organizations and people "of merit" explaining the situation in a targeted message.

TIME already has a top government official in its corner. Gov. Janet Napolitano supports the TIME Act, but it's too early to say how she would fit into efforts to promote it, spokeswoman Jeanine L'Ecuyer said.

But, L'Ecuyer said, it may be incorrect to assume that concerns about the economy and a tax increase will doom a plan that offers relief to voters tired of traffic.

"I wouldn't go at it assuming it's an uphill battle," she said.

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