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Transportation plans go unfinished with cuts

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A good time to ponder the declining state of transportation in the East Valley is while waiting for the Route 136 bus in Mesa.

Due to city budget cuts, Gilbert Road's public transit alternative has an hour-long gap between buses during non-peak times on weekdays and on Saturdays. This only was supposed to last a year, with Mesa anticipating normal half-hour service would resume in mid-2009 thanks to revenue created by a countywide transportation tax.

Funding transportation projects can be taxing [<http://www.eastvalleytribune.com/story/140402>]

But when Valley Metro, the region's mass-transit agency, developed its budget for the coming fiscal year, there was no additional money for Route 136. So riders who wait an hour now must wait at least another year for things to get better.

In the coming days, regional leaders will start making hard choices about the future of transportation in the East Valley and elsewhere. The public can make its voice be heard Thursday evening at a hearing in downtown Phoenix.

Decision-makers have known for months the bad economy has gutted Proposition 400, the 20-year half-cent transportation sales tax passed by Maricopa County voters in 2004. And now the bill has come due:

For transit, there will be a decline in forecasted revenues of slightly more than \$1 billion through the life of the tax. This amount is further allocated to bus transportation, which declined by \$568.4 million, and rail, which declined by \$433.6 million.

The plan for new and improved highways, which receives more than half of the tax revenue generated, now is looking at a \$6.6 billion deficit. According to the Maricopa Association of Governments, this is due to increased costs of construction and less money to pay for that asphalt.

Forecast revenue through 2026 for arterial projects, meaning streets and intersections, dropped 15 percent - almost \$200 million - in a matter of months.

So, some projects, such as light rail's extension into downtown Mesa, will be delayed. There will be "value engineering," where improvements to a major thoroughfare will be scaled back so 80 percent of the expected benefits are achieved at half the cost.

Multiply that by all the highway lanes, bus routes, roads and intersections across the East Valley slated to be built or bettered with money generated by Proposition 400, and the scope of the problem is apparent.