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Higher taxes for less traffic?

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Initiative proposes sales tax increase to help fix roads

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When voters go to the polls in November, they will choose more than just the next president.

An initiative on the Arizona ballot aims to provide money for the state's highways and transportation projects through a one-cent sales tax increase.

The Transportation Infrastructure Moving Arizona's Economy Initiative (or TIME) proposes to raise the sales tax from 5.6 percent to 6.6 percent to fund transportation improvements over the next 30 years. It would amount to a 17.8 percent increase in the state sales tax.

The tax hike would raise an estimated \$42.6 billion by 2040 to pay for projects, such as interstate highway expansion, rail projects and bike paths.

"It's not going to solve our problems, it's just going to help us stay up with the expected growth in this state," TIME Initiative Chairman J.D. Pruitt said.

Should the measure pass, the sales tax hike would go into effect in 2010.

"If it doesn't pass, you have to ask yourself when can you have another initiative that might be able to get passed," Pruitt said. "Politically, we think you could be 6 or 8 years out before you can get an initiative on a transportation bill through anything at the Legislature."

The TIME Initiative's backers estimate that the projects would add \$14.8 billion to the Pima County economy and create 96,000 jobs and add 200 miles of new or expanded roads over the next 30 years.

"Yes, it is a tax increase," Pruitt said. "I don't want to make light of that if somebody's unemployed or if somebody's at the real low end of the income. But we all throw away a lot of money just getting a Starbucks. Look at how many people that are buying coffee for three and a half bucks a glass."

Construction companies and homebuilders back the initiative, and, as of July 28, have helped raise more than \$914,600 to push for its passage, according to state campaign records.



Explorer file photo, Voters will get a chance to weigh in on the TIME Initiative in November. Supporters of the measure argue that the one-cent sales tax increase will fund much needed transportation projects.



Some environmental groups, including the Sierra Club, and low-tax advocates oppose the initiative.

"It's kind of a long-held Sierra Club policy that we think growth should pay for itself," said Sandy Bahr, director of the group's Grand Canyon Chapter.

Taxpayers would foot the bill for urban sprawl, Bahr said, adding that more focus should go to alternative transportation options.

"Considering where we are with transportation issues, considering the price of gasoline and how far behind with mass transit, including busses and rail, this really needed to be more focused on that," Bahr said.

Money generated by the tax increase would get divided among road construction and mass transit projects.

"If you're trying to solve the energy problem, there's a host of things to solve that," Pruitt said, adding that roads and highways alone will not alleviate Arizona's transportation woes.

Of the \$42.6 billion the initiative's expected to raise, about 58 percent (\$24.7 billion) would go toward highway projects. About 20 percent (\$8.5 billion), will go to local projects, especially those involving mass transit. About 18 percent (\$7.7 billion) will go to regional rail and transit projects. The remaining 4 percent (\$1.7 billion) will be set aside for walkways and bike paths.

"Our populations are going to double rapidly, and the infrastructure to support that growth is important," said Oro Valley Mayor Paul Loomis, who also chairs the Regional Transportation Authority board.

In Oro Valley and Marana, the TIME Initiative would increase the town's sales taxes up to 9.1 percent each.

While taxes will be paid statewide, the money will be distributed on a percentage basis to every county, which then will determine how to spend it.

For example, of the \$28.7 billion for highway projects, nearly half will go to Maricopa County. Pima County stands to get 12 percent, and another 3 percent will go to a conservation fund.

The remaining 39 percent of the revenue will get divided between the other 13 counties.

While the RTA manages the half-cent sales tax for road projects passed by county voters in 2006, it likely will fall on the RTA's parent group, the Pima Association of Governments, to dole out TIME money, according to Loomis.

The county has identified several projects it could pay for with TIME money.

Projects in Oro Valley and Marana include improvements to Tangerine Road, between I-10 and Oracle Road, and an expansion of Oracle to six lanes north of Tangerine.

If the initiative were to pass, project planning would begin immediately, Loomis said.

Another Northwest-area project could involve building a commuter rail line from Tucson to Phoenix. The route likely would start in Marana.

In all, Pima County would receive about \$1.9 million for project, according to the TIME Initiative's backers.

The 'megapolitan' Sun Corridor

It's easy to see why there's such a push for more money for highways and transportation.

Pinal County is one of the fastest growing in the nation. Pima County's population has crested the million mark, and the growth in the Phoenix area has made boomtowns out of communities like Surprise and Gilbert.

The new buzzword in growth and expansion is megapolitan.

The so-called Sun Corridor, stretching from Nogales, through Tucson and Phoenix, up to Prescott, is poised to become one of the top-20 megapolitan super-cities in the nation, comprising 80 percent of Arizona's population.

A study released in May by Arizona State University's Morrison Institute for Public Policy outlines the implications of such rapid growth.

"Few question that — without something soon — the Sun Corridor is on a collision course with traffic congestion," the ASU study suggests.

More freight is moved along Interstate 10 between Tucson and Phoenix than any other stretch of that interstate, according to the study.

In 2040, when the TIME initiative would expire, Pima County's population may have reached 1.6 million, according to Dave Taylor, a technical services coordinator with the Pima Association of Governments.

PAG puts the county's current population at 1,023,200.

In fiscal 2008, there were 923,271 vehicles registered in the county.

By 2040, the number of vehicles in Pima could reach 1,433,436.

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