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Pinal 'key' to proposed sales tax hike

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Pennies have a way of adding up. If a plan to implement a one-cent state sales tax increase meets voter approval in November, pennies could provide as much as \$4.3 billion for improving transportation throughout Pinal County, according to Gov. Janet Napolitano.

"I support this initiative it's especially good for Pinal County, where lots of growth is occurring," Napolitano told the Casa Grande Dispatch in a telephone interview on Tuesday. "The plan provides lots of transportation options."

Voters in November will be asked to decide on the Transportation and Infrastructure Moving Arizona's Economy initiative, which proposes adding one cent to the state's sales tax for the next 30 years to fund highway and transit projects. If it passes, the tax could raise about \$42.6 billion. About 58 percent of the funding would be used on highway projects while 18 percent would be set aside to create rail and transit systems. Other funds would be used to make walking and biking easier in communities.

Because of its geographic location and continued growth, Pinal County is "key" to the plan, Napolitano said.

Proponents of the tax say that the transportation upgrades throughout the state would reduce congestion; build needed highways, freeways and roads; create rail options for commuters and travelers; and protect the state's environment by creating bike paths, walkways and safer school routes.

Critics argue that in communities such as Casa Grande, an additional one cent would push the total sales tax up to 9.7 percent at a time when many are struggling through a sluggish economy.

But Napolitano said that the plan would bring an estimated 7,800 jobs to Pinal County over the next 30 years and fund the creation or expansion of an estimated 180 miles of roadways throughout the county. About \$1.7 billion would be used to link Pinal County communities via a rail system with other parts of the state and nearly \$335 million would be used for municipalities to improve local streets, according to Napolitano.

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Projects to widen Interstate 10 and Arizona 347 and support new freeways near Arizona 87 and Val Vista Boulevard in parts of Pinal County are also part of the plan.

If voters approve the new tax, it would go into effect in 2010, but improvements to roadways in Pinal County and other areas could begin as early as next year, according to Napolitano.

"Residents in Pinal County would start seeing benefits within the year. We would start projects as soon as possible," she said.

If the tax does not pass, those projects would be delayed, Napolitano said.



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