

What's Measure C? Why Fresno County could be voting on another sales tax measure

By Danielle Bergstrom

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Thirty five years ago, Fresno County's business and political leaders came together to finish building out an extensive freeway and highway system across the region, paving the way for explosive growth in north Fresno and Clovis. With dwindling property tax, state, and federal funds to complete the system, they went to the ballot box.

If the first version of Measure C was about freeways, the second version gave a nod to a future where it could be easier to walk, bike, or take transit, while keeping commutes easy for drivers.

A group of Fresno County leaders now is working to create a third version of Measure C.

What's at stake in conversations that leaders are having about the next version of Measure C? What should our future transportation system look like? Who makes those decisions, and why?

WHAT IS MEASURE C?

Measure C is a half-cent sales tax dedicated to funding new roads, freeways, sidewalks, trails, and public transportation in Fresno County.

The first version of Measure C was passed by voters in 1986, when county leaders and developers rallied to build out the region's vast freeway system we have today.

Although the current Measure C passed by voters in 2006 doesn't expire until 2026, regional transportation officials convened a group of leaders to explore putting a new version of the sales tax on the ballot as early as November 2022. This group is now deciding priorities for spending on new roads, potholes, transit, sidewalks, and bike lanes.

The current version of Measure C is expected to generate over \$1.2 billion in sales tax revenue by the time it expires in 2027.

California law requires that in order to pass, voters must approve Measure C by a two-thirds majority (66.6%).

WHAT HAS THE MONEY BEEN SPENT ON IN THE PAST?

Mostly roads.

The 1986 version set aside 75% of the total tax proceeds for building new freeways. Freeway 41, looming large over downtown and paving the way to Madera County, wouldn't exist without the first Measure C. Same goes for Freeway 180, heading east, and Freeway 168, which enabled much of Clovis' rapid northward expansion towards Shaver Lake (and displaced some 9,000 people in the process).

And the "braided ramps" project, also known as the interchange of 41/180/168 that makes you wonder if you're actually in Los Angeles? The expansion of Highway 180 to Reedley and Mendota? The many farm roads-turned suburban expressways, like Herndon, Willow, or Temperance? Thank the 2006 voters, who renewed Measure C.

To be clear, the 2006 version of Measure C was less focused on freeways and more focused on local streets, transit, and projects that address air quality. After a coalition of business leaders lost the effort to put another freeway-dominated Measure C on the ballot in 2002 (one critic, Mary Savala of the League of Women Voters, assailed the plan as the "Los Angelesization of Fresno"), a new group of leaders went back to the drawing board in 2006.

The resulting ballot measure included more money to improve local roads, trails and public transportation, and to replace diesel school buses. There was even money for 'rail consolidation' — when the prevailing thinking was that the two freight train lines traversing Fresno would be consolidated into one corridor.

(That money has since been re-allocated to create an underpass for McKinley and Blackstone Avenues to travel underneath the railroad tracks).

We also wouldn't have the major trail improvements in Clovis, along Fancher Creek in Sunnyside, and the new Midtown Trail, underway in central Fresno, without the 2006 Measure C.

A category of funding for "new technology" projects has been used to fund things like Fresno State's Transportation Institute and electric buses and planes and wifi on some FAX buses.

WHO DECIDES HOW THE MONEY WILL BE SPENT?

It's somewhat complicated.

The MC3 Executive Committee, a group of about 30 stakeholders from across the county, is responsible for assessing any plans, data, and community input to identify which types of transportation projects could be funded. A much larger committee, the MC3 Technical Committee, is supposed to advise the MC3 Executive Committee about what needs should be prioritized and the types of projects that could serve those needs.

A lot of plans guiding the future of roads, trails, bikeways, sidewalks, or public transportation are supposed to inform the Measure C renewal process. Some cities, including Fresno and Clovis, keep track of local road conditions to help them prioritize which streets with potholes to tackle first.

Lynne Ashbeck, co-chair of the MC3 Executive Committee and Clovis city councilmember, says the most important plan is Fresno County's Regional Transportation Plan, which is being updated now by the Fresno Council of Governments.

The Regional Transportation Plan is the document that officials rely on to prioritize how to spend the majority of funds that come from the state and federal governments for local transportation projects.

(For a view on what projects are being considered in the 2022 Regional Transportation Plan, click [here](#).)

But Ashbeck notes that while looking at what goes in Measure C is important, people should focus on cities and committees that are actually in charge of spending the money.

But community feedback is not always received well. Community leaders like Veronica Garibay, co-director of Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, say that local governments don't always listen to the suggestions of residents — which is why, to her, the priorities of Measure C matter.

The Measure C ballot language controls a lot of things, like how much money can be spent on freeways or public transportation, whether the money can pay for bike lanes or sidewalks, and which communities or projects might get priority for funding.

While some specific projects were named in the past — like widening Friant Road or expanding Freeway 180 — that is not typical. Most of the funding is split into broad categories (American Disabilities Act compliance, for example) leaving decisions on which projects get funded up to either local governments or sub-committees of transportation experts.

Once the MC3 Executive Committee decides on what's going to be funded by Measure C, the ballot language still has to go to the Fresno County Transportation Authority and the Fresno County Board of Supervisors for approval before it gets on the ballot.

HOW CAN I GET INVOLVED?

The Fresno County Transportation Authority, the entity in charge of organizing the Measure C process, is planning a community meeting on Oct. 26 from 6:00-8:00pm at the Fresno Convention Center in downtown Fresno. There will be a virtual forum on Oct. 27 from 1:00-3:00pm. To attend either event, you can register at www.measurec.com.

Fresno County leaders are asking that you fill out [this survey](#) to share your priorities.

You can also call a 24 hour hotline at 559-600-0413 to provide input.

Future community meetings will be scheduled, according to Sarah Pruner, a community engagement consultant for Measure C. Interested residents are also encouraged to schedule a community presentation or a one-on-one phone call to learn more, she shared.

The next Measure C Executive Committee meeting will be held on Nov. 10. Meetings are open to the public.

WHAT'S THE DEBATE GOING TO BE ABOUT FOR MEASURE C?

Discussions are still early, although an emerging theme is how much to spend on local streets and roads in existing communities versus regional projects that may support more growth. Here are some of the main issues raised:

- *How much should we spend to fix local streets?* “Fixing local streets is going to be a top priority, we’ve already heard,” Ashbeck said. In 2006, 15.3% of funding went to repairing local streets. But new estimates — as high as \$1.6 billion — are emerging as what it would take to make even a modest improvement in the county’s roads. Fresno Council of Governments executive director Tony Boren noted in a June 23 Measure C meeting that it would take at least 44% of the projected revenue from any future versions of Measure C to keep the streets maintained at the current levels, without further deterioration. According to Supervisor Buddy Mendes, Fresno County has a backlog of about \$600 million to fix county roads. That doesn’t include estimates for the surrounding cities, including Fresno.
- *How much should we expand freeways and roads if we can’t afford to fix what we have?* Some worry the pace of expanding roads isn’t keeping up with the amount of money needed to maintain those roads. However, both Boren and Mike Leonardo, the heads of Fresno County’s transportation agencies, say the county’s freeway-building days are complete. Supervisor Mendes, who also chairs the Fresno County Transportation Authority, isn’t so sure. “We really need to work on more of the four-lane on 180 west. And on 180 east, we can still expand into the hills farther,” Mendes said. “But we need to work on the west first.”
- *Should Measure C be a forever tax?* In an early 2021 poll for Measure C, FCTA staff included a question about whether voters should approve a Measure C tax that runs forever, as opposed to the current 20 year cycle. “I don’t think we’re going to go that way,” said Boren. “The current enabling legislation [for Measure C] says 20 or 30 years. To change that, we’d need a new state law that would have to be approved in Sacramento. Can that happen? I don’t know.”
- *What would it take to make transit more convenient, especially for people without a reliable car?* Transit wasn’t explicitly included in the 1986 version of Measure C. A quarter of the total funding was set aside for public transportation in 2006 — including vanpools for farmworkers and funding for new transit technologies, after outcry from air quality advocates. But despite the boost in funds, while FAX’s ridership has grown over the last decade, commute times for transit riders remain much higher than for commuters who drive.
- *The return of free transit?* Fresno Councilmember Tyler Maxwell led the charge for FAX’s season of free transit fares from March to September of this year, subsidized in part through federal pandemic assistance. A state law that requires local transit agencies to use at least 20% of local funding on new service means that if FAX goes zero fare again, another source of money — like Measure C — would be needed to fill the gap. “We saw a ridership jump of 23% during free fares,” Maxwell said. (There was also an increase in the capacity of buses during that period, after pandemic protocols were relaxed.) Rural transit riders — often farmworkers and their families — could also benefit from free transit. According to Moses Stites, director of the Fresno County Rural Transit Authority, the cost of public transit is one of the largest barriers to improving ridership.
- *How much should suburban and industrial developers pay for roads they benefit from?* Whenever a new development is built — whether it’s an Amazon warehouse, a shopping center or housing subdivision, a plan has to be put in place for how to build a system of roads and sidewalks to accommodate the full amount of traffic expected to be generated in that area. Right now, developers pay something called a Regional Transportation Mitigation Fee — to ensure that they

pay their fair share of building the roads that come to their new developments. Some environmental advocates say taxpayers are paying too much of the tab for projects that don't benefit them.

- *More road improvements, trails, protected bike lanes, and sidewalks — in older and working class neighborhoods?* The 2006 version of Measure C included set-asides for local streets, trails and bike facilities. But in Fresno and Clovis, most trails have been built in newer, more affluent neighborhoods, according to a FresnoLand analysis of Measure C funds. (A new trail using Measure C funds is planned in central Fresno.) No Measure C dollars have been spent improving sidewalks or bike lanes in unincorporated disadvantaged communities.
- *What will the state and feds even pay for?* Measure C is just one of almost 30 or 40 sources of funding available for Fresno County officials to spend on transportation, according to Kristine Cai, deputy director with the Fresno Council of Governments. It's often used in combination with state and federal gas tax revenues, among other grants, to build projects. But as California policymakers have decidedly moved away from funding new freeways and road widening, voters are going to have to pay for more of it themselves if they want to see more of that. Some are watching the uncertainty in Washington, DC too. "It's premature to be discussing Measure C when we don't know what the federal infrastructure bill is going to bring us," said Fresno city councilmember, Miguel Arias.
- *Should projects be included in Measure C if they aren't in the Regional Transportation Plan?* "As a planning professional, I hope all the projects [in Measure C] come from the Regional Transportation Plan. You don't want agencies planning in different directions. We don't have enough money to go in different directions," said Cai. The Regional Transportation Plan, under development now, is the county's blueprint for spending over \$6 billion dollars in road and transit infrastructure across the region.
- *More accountability to the voters?* Today, voters have no assurances that their roads will be substantively improved after paying 20 years of taxes to fix them. Some transportation leaders, like Leonardo, would like to see more concrete promises made to voters when it comes to maintenance and transit funding. "Right now, cities submit to us a list of projects they've used our funding for," he said. "Could we have a goal? How much progress have you made on improving your average road conditions? And with transit, what are you doing to increase service and lower costs?"

KNP Complex firefighters shelter in place amid bomb cyclone. Could storm extinguish wildfire?

By Joshua Yeager

Visalia Times-Delta, Monday, Oct. 25, 2021

An atmospheric river buffeted the Sierra Nevada with several inches of rain and feet of snow on Monday, sidelining firefighters who were forced to shelter in place to avoid potential mudslides and floods while battling the KNP Complex and Windy fires.

The massive storm system could be a mixed blessing for fire managers hoping that the torrential downpour will extinguish flames lingering in the heaviest and longest-burning fuels.

"The best-case scenario, in a perfect world, is the rain would be able to get into those [heavy fuels] and really help us [with] putting out the fire, putting out the heat," said Kimberly Kashlak, fire information officer, California Incident Management Team 12.

But crews are also preparing for the worst-case scenario: Dangerous mudslides and flooding that can ravage freshly burned areas lacking the soil and tree cover to absorb the influx of moisture.

In Fresno County, the entirety of the Creek Fire burn scar was put on evacuation notice due to the high risk of mudslides, debris flows, and flooding. Monday's storm is the largest to hit the area since the fire was contained in December 2020.

"The areas damaged by the Creek Fire in 2020 continue to be the focus of a potential weather-made disaster," the Fresno County Sheriff's Office stated ahead of the storm's arrival.

As of Monday afternoon, it's too early to tell the effects the storm will have on the two wildfires burning in Tulare County, fire managers said. Conditions on the ground will have to improve before it is safe for firefighters to get a lay of the land.

"Anytime we get moisture, it's a good thing," Kashlak said. "But you have to get the right amount of moisture at the right time. Otherwise, it's just going to runoff."

"We're hoping this nice, steady rain is gonna hold up," she said. "It's definitely going to help with those heavy fuels."

Snow had already begun to fall at higher elevations in Sequoia National Park, including the world-famous Grant Grove, rangers said.

The southern Sierra is projected to receive up to 18 inches of snow at higher elevations and 3 inches of rain at lower elevations, according to the National Weather Service Hanford office.

The Valley floor was also heavily impacted by the storm system, with areas of Visalia experiencing flooding and power outages.

It's not known whether the atmospheric river will put an end to California's wildfire season. Santa Ana winds could potentially cause problems for Southern California through November, forecasters said.

However, according to federal monitors, the weather has been a boon to the parched Sierra, which is suffering an exceptional drought.

"This [storm] is certainly helping the firefighting efforts. For the most part, the active fires will greatly benefit from this precipitation," said Chris Foltz, an NWS meteorologist assigned to the Windy Fire.

The Windy Fire is burning on the Tule River Indian Reservation and Sequoia National Forest. The blaze had been 92% contained before the arrival of this week's storms.

No mudslides had affected burned areas, Foltz said, cautioning that rain was still falling.

The KNP Complex ignited on Sept. 9 and has burned more than 88,000 acres across Sequoia National Park and forest. The blaze has threatened or killed dozens of giant sequoia trees, which only grow in the western Sierra.

Recently, firefighters have made significant progress in containing the blaze, aided by cooler temperatures and wetter conditions.

The KNP Complex was 63% contained on Monday.