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Regional Measure 3: A taxing ripoff proposal?

Jack Gray 3 hrs ago

A headline story in the Register of Feb. 11 alluded to a proposal to boost Bay Area bridge tolls by \$3 ("Proposed Bay Area bridge toll hikes could benefit Napa County projects").

Implementation of Regional Measure 3 is now scheduled to be on the June ballots of all nine counties of the Association of Bay Area Governments. The article indicated that Napa would benefit if bridge tolls rise.

I have served on the 'Policy Advisory Counsel'" of the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) in the past and disagree with the article's conclusion. In addition to raising bridge tolls (on all Bay Area bridges except the Golden Gate) this measure would expand the authority of the MTC and create a new expanded regional bureaucratic taxing authority.

A number of specific problems are apparent with this proposal:

1. It is similar to the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority Promoted by ABAG and the MTC, which sponsored the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority (SFBRA). This measure did not pass in Napa, Sonoma, Solano or Contra Costa counties. Measure AA parcel tax, however, was passed based on the total ballots in all nine ABAG counties. It is, thus, a ripoff tax for the counties, including Napa, where resident voters did not support it. Again like the establishment of the SFBRA, no action is identified for voters to elect the officials who will be responsible for management of the new Regional Measure 3 funds collected.

Instead the officials managing the billions of dollars collected will all be appointed and are, thus, not responsible to residents and can not be easily removed or replaced.

2. In the past, Regional Measure 1 and Regional Measure 2 both increased tolls on the Bay Area bridges by \$1. Measure 3 allows \$3 toll increases on the same bridges and is projected to raise over \$4 billion in new revenues. Additional increases for inflation or other purposes could be proposed by the new regional authority. An initial list of projects resulting from these toll increases shows an initial \$2.68 billion project list to be funded by the higher tolls collected.

The largest beneficiary of these added tolls will be BART. Related documents reveal that BART will be paying off a Measure AA bond until 2038 and in 2016 BART was separately authorized to issue \$3.5 billion in General Obligation Bonds that are planned to be issued over 18 years. Final payoff of these bonds will not occur until 2048. BART has been described by members of the MTC as being “too big to fail.” Regional transit ridership is currently lower than it was in 1982. It is also interesting to note that BART’s customer satisfaction ratings were reported in 2017 to have dropped to the lowest level in the last 20 years.

3. Voters should note that MTC has not been a responsible manager of public funds that have been provided for its operations. Billions have been spent based on promises of congestion relief that has not occurred. The MTC has also spent over \$250 million of bridge tolls for the controversial purchase and renovation of an unnecessary office building in San Francisco for itself and sister groups of ABAG, SFBRA and others.

4. The resolution for Regional Measure 3 states in part, “Shall voters authorize a plan to reduce auto and truck traffic, relieve crowding on BART, unclog freeway bottlenecks, and improve bus, ferry and commuter rail service as specified in this voter pamphlet, with a \$1 toll increase effective in 2019, a \$1 increase in 2022, and a \$1 increase in 2025, all on Bay Area toll bridges except the Golden Gate Bridge, with independent oversight of all funds?” This statement increases the authority of the MTC to spend the increased billions of dollars that will be collected without any specific controls. The routinely used designation of an oversight committee to verify expenditures for this measure is meaningless without specification of actual authorities to approve and monitor projects and expenses.

5. I recognize that American Canyon and the Napa County Transportation Authority personnel have been influenced by the promise of \$20 million if this measure is passed. This promised bribe represents less than half a percent of the increased tolls that will be collected.

6. I personally will not be significantly impacted because I only occasionally cross one of the toll bridges involved. However, I believe anyone commuting to or from the San Francisco Bay area would be severely impacted and many would be crossing two or more of the toll bridges daily. This could also adversely affect tourism associated with our wine industry.

Before continually searching for or asking taxpayers for more revenue I believe the MTC and the regional sister agencies should be focusing on actions to be more efficient with the funding already provided for transportation projects in the Bay Area.

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