

Santa Clara County looking at bond measure to fund affordable housing

The Mercury News, by Eric Kurhi, ekurhi@bayareanewsgroup.com

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SAN JOSE -- Santa Clara County supervisors on Tuesday asked for more information about a potential \$750 million affordable housing bond -- including more specificity on possible uses -- that could be placed on the November ballot.

While the decision on whether or not to pursue such an option was put off until at least June, Supervisor Cindy Chavez said the money would definitely go toward the element of the population who is already in the county's safety net or nearly there -- those who are considered extremely low income or very low income.

"The purpose is going out there and having a conversation about the people who are in our wheelhouse, who we're responsible for," Chavez said, adding that includes seniors, the disabled and foster youth. "Can we engage with and excite the public to invest in this problem?"

The board hired a consultant to look into the matter earlier this year, although the initial idea was to get a sales tax measure before voters in June. It came on the heels of an approved plan to raise homeless spending by \$64 million, with contributions also coming from San Jose and other entities.

However, the timeline was tight with a March 11 deadline to get on the June ballot. And there are other sales tax measures in play: San Jose has put forth Measure B, a quarter-cent tax for public safety and street repair on the June ballot, and the Valley Transportation Authority is expected to go ahead with a bid for a half-cent increase for November.

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The county-commissioned poll conducted by EMC research found that a bond measure to raise money for affordable housing would barely clear the two-thirds vote needed for approval, and that number falls by 10 percent after potential voters were told that the measure would cost property owners \$14 per \$100,000 in assessed value, with a stated goal of raising \$750 million through general obligation bonds.

But that number rises again when those polled were told about who could benefit from the bond and the message of a need for affordable housing resonated, with a vast majority agreeing that it's difficult to find a place to live in Santa Clara County.

Ruth Bernstein of EMC said the November election would benefit the cause, with occasional voters -- who are much more likely to go to the polls in this year's presidential race than other elections -- showing much stronger support for a bond than those who vote each cycle. She added that the housing issue is weighing far heavier in voters' minds than it has in the past.

"This is obviously a high concern to voters -- they recognize housing is a challenge," she said. "There does seem to be a real opportunity here given the high support low-propensity voters and the high turnout expected.

The board will be given an update in June. The deadline to put a measure on the November ballot is Aug. 12.