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Sales tax hike could pay for transport around Pinal - including toll roads

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June 03, 2008

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Two major highway projects in the Casa Grande area tied to a proposed one-cent increase in the state's sales tax could end up being toll roads.

They are the Val Vista Freeway, a 46-mile road beginning in the part of Maricopa County west of the Pinal line, linking to Val Vista Boulevard in Casa Grande and on to a proposed 53-mile "North-South Corridor" running from Interstate 10 south of Eloy, east of Coolidge, west of Florence and then on to Apache Junction to serve the East Valley.

Both projects are listed by the Arizona Department of Transportation in what the agency calls the Statewide Transportation Investment Strategy. That is linked to the proposed sales tax increase ballot proposal being sponsored by a group calling itself the TIME Coalition, short for Transportation and Infrastructure Moving Arizona's Economy.

The complete proposal may be found on the ADOT Web site at www.azdot.gov, clicking on Statewide Transportation Investment Strategy. No construction start dates are listed.

The Val Vista Freeway is projected to cost \$340 million and the North-South to cost \$393 million. Widening of Interstate 10 to six lanes between Riggs Road and Interstate 17 is listed as costing \$500 million.

Other Pinal County projects listed are widening Arizona 77 to six lanes from the county line to Oracle Junction at a cost of \$25.5 million, widening U.S. 60 to four lanes from Arizona 79 to Globe at a cost of \$207 million, and building a new route from the county line between Queen Creek and Apache Junction to U.S. 60 at a cost of \$771 million.

Two other major projects in this area were on the initial list, but were taken out of the version that goes to the State Transportation Board during hearings beginning this week.

They were turning Montgomery Road west of Casa Grande into a high-capacity north-south corridor and a project to widen and reconstruct Arizona 347, including a Maricopa Bypass. No explanation has been given for their removal.

Both Val Vista and North-South are listed by ADOT as "potential public-private partnership projects." That is a bureaucratic term that can mean anything from a contract with a private company, such as a bus or shuttle service, to toll roads.

In these two cases, the wording that leads to a belief they may be toll roads says the routes should "have parallel routes for users not willing to pay for the use of such a corridor."

Casa Grande officials say no one has specifically told them that the two proposed routes would be toll roads, but the understanding is that the work in Pinal County would be toll, while many projects in Maricopa County would be

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The TIME Coalition backers contend that the one-cent state sales tax increase would raise an estimated \$42.583 billion over 30 years. Of that, Pinal County is projected to receive about \$4.34 billion for road and public transit programs, or about 10 percent. Maricopa County is projected to receive \$20.7 billion, or almost half of the \$42.583 billion.

The breakdown of the \$42.583 billion is \$24.698 billion for "strategic highway projects," or 58 percent, including a \$1.277 billion conservation fund. Of that, 49 percent, or \$11.476 billion, is for the Maricopa County area; 12 percent, or \$2.811 billion, is for the Pima County area, and 39 percent, or \$9.134 billion, would be split among the other 13 counties.

Another \$7.665 billion, or 18 percent, would be for rail and transit projects and programs; \$8.517 billion, or 20 percent, would go for local transportation projects, with 60 percent going to the Maricopa County region, 38 percent to the other 14 counties and 2 percent to Indian tribes outside of the Maricopa County area; and \$1.703 billion, or 4 percent, would be for transportation enhancement and "walkable/bikeable communities."

The ADOT report also shows that out of Pinal County's \$4.3 billion total, \$1.6 billion would go toward being part of high-speed rail connections and \$695 million for a bus transit program connecting communities, van-pool and ride-share programs and planning for transit and rail.

The report shows \$336 million for Pinal County for local transportation projects. Of that, Casa Grande would receive \$34,305,980. Casa Grande's part of the walking/biking and other transportation enhancement would be \$9,061,333.

The complete breakdowns for the 15 counties are included in the Statewide Transportation Investment Strategy proposals.

The proposals go before the State Transportation Board beginning Wednesday in Flagstaff.

On June 9, the hearing will be in Marana from 5-7 p.m. in the Marana Council Chambers, 11555 W. Civic Center Drive, followed by June 11 from 5-7 p.m. at the Phoenix Convention Center, 100 N. Third St., and June 19 from 9-11 a.m. at the Manning House, 450 W. Paseo Redondo in Tucson.



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