

The Road Ahead

by Darren Kettle



It was Wednesday, Nov. 9, 2016, the morning after Election Day and I woke up to congratulatory notes from friends throughout Ventura County. They were complimenting the Ventura County Transportation Commission's efforts in what those friends thought was the successful passage of Measure AA. After all, anybody that was watching the county elections website had seen the measure receive support from nearly 58% of Ventura County voters.

Measure AA would have been Ventura County's first transportation sales tax measure, raising \$70 million a year for 30 years that would be invested in projects to relieve congestion on the 101 and 118, repair and maintain local city and county roads, and build projects to move freight safely and efficiently through Ventura County. The measure would have funded improving sidewalks and bicycle lanes and trails, and kept bus fares affordable for students, seniors, and veterans. It had an environmental component that would fund projects to clean storm water runoff from our roads before that polluted water ended up in our ground water or on our beaches. Finally, Ventura County would have been able to compete for federal and state transportation grant funds because the region would have had the critical local match that is almost always required.



Here is the rub: I had to respond to all of those good friends who meant well that, while 58% sure sounds like a winning margin, the rules in California require that a measure such as AA needs a 66.7%, or 2/3rd yes vote to pass. I have heard some say that the measure was rejected, or failed, and, yes, technically, measure AA did not pass. But when 58% of Ventura County voters vote for a comprehensive transportation investment package, my take away is that transportation is a key element of our quality-of-life, and it matters to Ventura County residents.

Since that groggy morning I have had people from throughout Ventura County, Southern California, and around the entire State ask when might Ventura County make another attempt, and for now the answer is, "I don't know when...or if." What I do know is that Ventura County commuters and commerce will be spending more time in freeway gridlock. We will have limited public transit options. An opportunity has been lost for creating construction jobs (jobs our local economy desperately needs). Other counties will get our tax dollars because we are at a competitive disadvantage in the pursuit of federal and state transportation grants because we lack local matching funds.



Of course, Measure AA wasn't the only item on the ballot. The presidential candidates from the two major parties both campaigned on the benefits of infrastructure investment. In the transportation world, the federal government usually works in a five- or six-year funding cycle. Currently we are operating under a law known as the FAST Act that expires in 2020. President Trump has said he will introduce a \$1 trillion infrastructure package. So far, there are few details of that package, but the President's reference to utilizing private investment in public infrastructure leads transportation professionals to believe the package will focus on major corridor projects. It will probably utilize private sector funding with a payback approach that likely will involve some form of tolling in order for the private sector to earn a return on their investment. A major freeway corridor improvement such as widening the 101 through urban Ventura County might just be the type of project the President thinks might interest private sector investors, but VCTC's research showed Ventura voters do not like the concept of a toll road on the 101.

The Trump Administration's first proposed budget alarmed public transit advocates by eliminating major capital investments for public transit throughout the country. Fortunately, federal funding for transit operations was not on the

chopping block. Ultimately it is the United States Congress' job to approve the federal budget, but the President's "skinny budget" is an indication of where this administration stands on public transit.

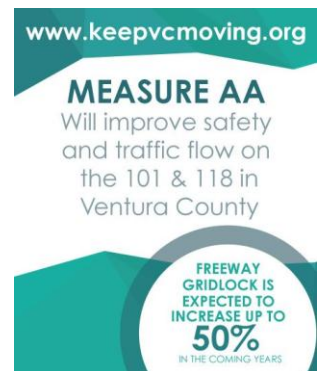
In early 2015, Governor Brown called a Special Session of the Legislature to address transportation funding, especially road repair. Although no action was taken during that Special Session, it served as an impetus to get off the schneid and led to a flurry of activity in early 2017. The Governor and Legislative leadership announced an agreement on a transportation funding package at the end of March, and Senate Bill 1 passed by a two-thirds vote of both houses in April on what was, for the most part, a partisan vote.



Thank goodness for the end of the drought, but all it took was one wet winter to set off the ticking time-bomb of what can happen to our streets, roads, highways, freeways, and bridges when maintenance and repairs are put off due to lack of funding. The rain caused potholes that made our streets look like Swiss cheese.

SB 1, known as the Road Repair and Accountability Act, provides an estimated \$5.2 billion of new revenues annually and invests those funds primarily in shoring up the state highway system, repairing city and county roads and bridges, and providing some additional funding for public transit. The principle of "fix it first" is fundamental to SB 1. Ventura County local governments will receive nearly \$26 million annually for fixing streets, roads and bridges. However, there are several other funding programs that will support Ventura County transportation needs including capital and operating funds for bus transit and Metrolink commuter rail. Additionally, there is a category to fund freight movement projects, and I expect that the \$60 million-to-\$70 million Rice Avenue Bridge (over the Union Pacific Railroad tracks in Oxnard so that freight can move safely and efficiently to and from the Port of Hueneme) will be an ideal project for that funding...assuming, of course, that we can identify a local match that the freight movement program will require—an issue VCTC struggles with regularly due to the lack of a transportation sales tax measure. SB 1 provides the funding for critically needed investment in California's and Ventura County's transportation system but it does not solve all of our long range transportation challenges. SB 1 addresses the "aging pains" of California's transportation system but does little to address the "growing pains."

Ventura County residents are spending more and more time every day sitting in freeway gridlock on the 101, 118, and 23 as they endure their daily commute. The trend is expected to get worse as the time we sit in bumper to bumper traffic is projected to increase by 50% over the next 10-15 years. In other words, on a typical weekday afternoon the 101 is stop-and-go for about 2 hours, so in the future we will be sitting in bumper to bumper traffic for 3 hours every afternoon. Unfortunately, major freeway gridlock-relieving project funding did not make it into the final package, leaving Ventura County with the question of where does the money come from to improve our freeways and preserve our quality of life.



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