

WEST COUNTY TIMES

Contra Costa supervisors to explore whether to hike sales tax to fund health and public safety

*By Robert Rogers
Contra Costa Times*

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MARTINEZ -- In an ongoing effort to save a moribund West County public hospital and beef up county health and public safety funding, Contra Costa supervisors on Tuesday will decide whether to take initial steps toward putting a county-wide sales tax measure on the November ballot.

County supervisors John Gioia and Karen Mitchoff will propose an item authorizing the hiring of an outside firm to conduct a public opinion poll to gauge the public's appetite for a sales tax hike of one-quarter or one-half a cent in all cities and unincorporated areas in the county.

"The idea is a broader public safety, public health tax, a general tax that only requires a majority vote," Gioia said. "We're at a very early stage where we need to do some polling."

Gioia said a quarter-cent sales tax hike could raise about \$38 million per year, and a half-cent tax would pull in double that.

As a general tax, there would be no legal requirements for exactly how the proceeds would be allocated, but Gioia said saving Doctors Medical Center in San Pablo would be a key objective. The hospital faces an \$18 million operating deficit and is set to

close in July or August following the rejection of a parcel tax measure by West County Health Care District voters in May.

A push for a countywide tax to help save the hospital could merge with other community and labor efforts that have built steam since the parcel tax failed. California/National Nurses United, the union that represents many of the hospital's workers, has organized a series of town hall-style rallies and put pressure on the county to step in with new funding.

Union officials have also said they will consider pay cuts to help close the hospital's deficit, which is driven mostly by low reimbursement rates for Medicare and Medi-Cal recipients, which comprise the majority of the hospital's patients. The closure of DMC would create a health care crisis affecting the entire county, health care advocates say.

"The potential closure of DMC would overwhelm the intensive care unit (ICU) at Contra Costa Regional Medical Center (Martinez)," said Kathy Avila, a nurse at the Martinez hospital, in a prepared statement. "We have eight ICU beds, while DMC has 23. A closure of DMC would strain existing services past the point of safety."

Even if voters passed a county sales tax hike in November, the hospital, which sees roughly 40,000 visits to its emergency department annually, faces potential closure before then.

"It depends on whether DMC can get bridge funding for the rest of 2014," Gioia said. "If it can, the hospital can remain open until the sales tax comes on line in January 2015; if it doesn't get bridge funding, the sales tax revenue can be used to re-open Doctors hospital."

A countywide sales tax hike -- which would be the first in Contra Costa County -- faces a series of obstacles in addition to garnering a majority of voter support.

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Two cities in the county, Moraga and El Cerrito, already have sales tax rates of 9.5 percent, which is the cap per state law that limits localities to sales taxes no more than 2 percentage points above the state rate of 7.5 percent.

The county would need a waiver from the state -- passed by the Legislature and signed by Gov. Jerry Brown -- to exceed the cap, a waiver that has been granted to several other counties in the state. Gioia said Assemblywoman Nancy Skinner, D-Berkeley, has already agreed to sponsor the waiver.

"We have to work on a dual track," Gioia said. "It's not easy, but we're optimistic."

If the board approves a poll and the results come back favorably, four of five members would have to approve the ballot measure by July to get it onto the November ballot.

Supporters are hopeful the sales tax may pass, despite widespread voter tax fatigue, particularly of property taxes. Sales taxes consistently poll with better support than property taxes, and the list of services that could benefit constitute an array of programs that have enjoyed general popularity with the public, including emergency transportation services, fire and law enforcement.

San Mateo and Santa Clara county voters passed similar sales taxes in 2012, with hikes of one-half cent and one-eighth cent, respectively. Alameda County voters will decide Tuesday whether to extend a half-cent sales tax that funds health services from its 2019 expiration to a new sunset date of 2034.

Contact Robert Rogers at 510-262-2726. Follow him at [Twitter.com/sfbaynewsrogers](https://twitter.com/sfbaynewsrogers).

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If you go

What:: Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors meeting
discussion of a county-wide sales tax hike

When:: 9 a.m. Tuesday Where: Contra Costa County County
Administration Building, 651 Pine St., Martinez

Why: Board members are on the hunt for funding to save
Doctors Medical Center in San Pablo and beef up funds to public
safety and county health programs.

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