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Regional transportation planning group rejects Pittsburg's attempt at independence

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Contra Costa Times

Posted: 01/27/2011 09:08:14 PM PST

Updated: 01/28/2011 05:49:54 PM PST

Pittsburg could be in jeopardy of losing about $500,000 annually in local transportation funds after officials rejected a proposal this week to allow the city to operate its own fee-collection program.

After withdrawing from an East Contra Costa financing group last summer because of disagreements over funding priorities, Pittsburg formed its own fee-collection program that it submitted to the TRANSPLAN Committee, East County's transportation planning group.

Pittsburg's idea was to work jointly with the financing group on transportation projects while directing its fee income from developers toward its priorities, including the extension of James Donlon Boulevard.

The East Contra Costa Regional Fee and Financing Authority collects fees that are then doled out to transportation-related projects, while TRANSPLAN oversees regional transportation interests and plans.

TRANSPLAN members voted 8-2 against Pittsburg's proposal Thursday night, with only Pittsburg's representatives -- Councilman Ben Johnson and Planning Commissioner Bruce Ohlson -- voting in favor.

The decision means Pittsburg remains in TRANSPLAN and has a voice in regional planning issues but is not compliant with a growth-management plan for Measure J, a half-cent sales tax for county road improvements.

As a result, Pittsburg could lose its 18 percent share of Measure J funds that go back to cities, known as return-to-source funds. The city received about $574,000

in local funds last fiscal year.

Pittsburg would receive money for this fiscal year, but funds for future years could be in jeopardy.

TRANSPLAN sets the structure for fee collections in East Contra Costa.

Pittsburg assistant city manager Joe Sbranti said city staff and elected officials will discuss the matter and weigh their options.

Those options include appealing the decision to the Contra Costa Transportation Authority, rejoining the East Contra Costa Regional Fee and Financing Authority, or taking legal action.

"I assume they're going to find a way to leverage the fact that they would like their return-of-source funds," county Supervisor Federal Glover said Friday.

"The ball is in their court," said Brentwood mayor and committee member Bob Taylor.

Pittsburg's proposed list of regional transportation projects is identical to that of the regional funding

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plan, Sbranti said. The TRANSPLAN staff report focused on procedural issues rather than the regional benefit of Pittsburg's plan, he said in a letter to the committee.

Representatives from Oakley, Brentwood and Antioch opposed Pittsburg's plan Thursday, saying multiple fee-collection programs weaken the region's clout in securing state and federal dollars.

"To be able to speak with one voice has made all the sense in the world," said Glover, a committee member.

Antioch, Brentwood and Oakley teamed up to push projects that benefit their cities, namely the Highway 4 bypass and widening Highway 4, while passing over funding a 1.7-mile extension of James Donlon Boulevard south of Pittsburg, Johnson said.

"We want to work as a team, but the bottom line is we didn't see any money. It should be a two-way street," Johnson said.

Financing authority members argue that they tried to iron out a deal, offering to guarantee $33.2 million in future fees for the James Donlon extension and extended BART service into East County. But P ittsburg refused, asking for more money for eBART and a guarantee that half of the $2.5 million it withheld during the dispute would go toward the projects.

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