

Los Altos Town Crier

Community news for Los Altos, Los Altos Hills and Mountain View since 1947

November 5, 2014

County libraries – including Los Altos – are free again

Town Crier Report

The Santa Clara County Library District Joint Powers Authority (JPA) Board voted Thursday to eliminate the \$80 annual library-card fee for users who do not live in the library district.

The vote was 8-3 in favor of the motion made by County Supervisor Joe Simitian, serving his second year on the JPA.

Until 2011, the state of California reimbursed public libraries for lending materials to residents of other library jurisdictions.



Simitian

When the state announced plans to cut the \$2.1 million the Santa Clara County Library District received to allow out-of-district residents to use its libraries, the JPA imposed an \$80 annual fee for a library card for nonresidents to recover the loss. With the JPA's vote to eliminate

the fee, effective July 1, residents of Mountain View, Palo Alto, Sunnyvale, Los Gatos, San Jose and Santa Clara are able to use any library in the county at no charge for the first time since 2011.

"No other library system in the county charges nonresidents for a library card," Simitian said. "So residents of the county library district could borrow freely in other communities, but the residents of those communities got slapped with an \$80 fee when they showed up in our district and asked for reciprocity."

According to Simitian, the fee didn't raise much money, cost a lot to administer and was a "nuisance" to members of the public who had to provide proof of residency.

"It just struck me as wrong on so many levels," he said. "Our public libraries aren't truly public when we charge an entrance fee. This \$80 charge essentially became a 'knowledge tax.' It's time we stopped charging folks for access."

Simitian initially requested that the library district review the fee

LIBRARY

during the county budget process earlier this year. It was, he said, one of the first issues he heard about when he started holding sidewalk office hours in his district.

Elayne Dauber, former Los Altos Hills mayor and longtime member of the Los Altos Library Commission, said she was pleased with the district JPA Board's action.

"I'm delighted," she said. "We can be good neighbors again."

Prior to the vote, to be eligible for a free Santa Clara County Library District card, users had to live or own property in the unincorporated area of Santa Clara County or in one of the following nine cities or towns: Los Altos, Los Altos Hills, Cupertino, Campbell, Gilroy, Milpitas, Monte Sereno, Morgan Hill or Saratoga.

For more information, visit scccl.org.

Los Altos Town Crier

Community news for Los Altos, Los Altos Hills and Mountain View since 1947

December 10, 2014

Editorial

Holiday thumbs

Thumbs-up: To our Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors representative Joe Simitian. Two recent board decisions that Simitian spearheaded directly impact us in perhaps small but certainly positive ways. First, he led the recent action to end \$80 library-card fees for nonresidents (this means you, Mountain View) using the county district libraries (including Los Altos). Beginning July 1 of next year, nonresident cards will be free, as is already the case with libraries in other cities. Simitian also led the decision to eliminate additional fees for those paying their property taxes online. A career politician? Yes, and one who's producing tangible results.

February 25, 2019

A tax that never happened

BY ELAINE GOODMAN
Daily Post correspondent

Bay Area voters face a steady stream of tax increases proposed each election by cities, counties and school districts.

For the most part, elected officials are happy to ask voters for tax hikes, which they see as a way to pay for transportation projects, affordable housing, or infrastructure, as a few examples.

Because Simitian said he couldn't justify it to voters

As a result, the sales tax had climbed to 9% in Santa Clara County as of October and 8.75% in San Mateo County. It is even higher in some cities within

those counties. Hotel tax in Palo Alto has shot up to 15.5% with voter approval of a tax increase in the November election.

But occasionally a politician will say enough is enough when it comes to taxes. That was the case in June, when Santa Clara County Supervisor Joe Simitian cast a deciding vote against

(cont. next page)

TAX

putting a measure on the November 2018 ballot to raise the county's sales tax by a half cent.

Supervisor Mike Wasserman also voted against putting the measure on the ballot. The ballot measure needed approval from four of the five supervisors to move forward. Despite the decision's implications, the vote to quash the ballot measure received little media attention.

The half-cent sales tax would have raised about \$200 million per year for the county to use for any purpose. Some priority areas identified for the spending were law enforcement, mental health services, affordable housing, and services for the homeless, seniors and families. Supervisor Dave Cortese said it was an ideal time to ask voters for a tax increase that would "take this county to the next level."

But in explaining his vote against the tax measure, Simitian said he had watched the county's budget balloon by 57% from 2012 to 2017, to about

\$7 billion. The county population increased only 6% during that time, Simitian said, and inflation, more people accessing health care, or "catching up" after budget cuts during the recession didn't fully explain the large increase.

"(I) asked myself could I go to the public and say we need a half-cent sales tax that generates \$200 million a year when during the five years that I had been here ... the budget had increased by \$2.5 billion," Simitian said. "And I thought, I can't make the case."

The burden on taxpayers was another issue for Simitian.



SIMITIAN

In 2016, voters approved Measure B, a half-cent sales tax in Santa Clara County for the Valley Transportation Authority to use on transportation projects. The state authorized a 12-cent-per-gallon gas tax in 2017, as well as an increase to the vehicle license fee last year. Voters also agreed to a series of toll increases on Bay area bridges that began this year.

A regressive tax

And a sales tax is a regressive tax, hitting lower-income residents harder, Simitian said.

"Given all of those other burdens that have very recently been added on working families, people of modest means, lower-income folks, to move forward with a regressive sales tax, I think, would do them a disservice," he said.

And although supervisors could name projects that they believed were

most in need of additional funding, Simitian noted that the funds raised by a sales tax increase could be spent in any way.

"It's not a special tax, so that means that while there are all these worthy things that each one of us will be an advocate for, there's no assurance that the money would be spent on those things, no assurance as to what the funds would actually be spent on or how they would be used," he said.

Smaller tax approved

Instead of the half-cent sales tax measure, supervisors decided to ask voters to extend the county's existing one-eighth cent sales tax, which was set to expire in March 2023. The sales tax extension, which appeared on the November ballot as Measure A, was approved with 74.2% of voters in favor. A majority vote was needed.

According to the Measure A language, the tax will generate about \$50 million a year, which could be used for purposes "such as" law enforcement and public safety; trauma and emergency care; affordable housing; services for the homeless, seniors, and families; agricultural preservation; and mental health services.

Although the Santa Clara Board of Supervisors opted against the half-cent sales tax ballot measure last year, voters could soon be facing other sales tax measures.

In particular, Caltrain is gearing up to put a one-eighth-of-a-cent sales tax on the 2020 ballot in the three counties it serves, San Francisco, San Mateo and Santa Clara.

Los Altos Town Crier

Community news for Los Altos, Los Altos Hills and Mountain View since 1947

August 8, 2018

Proposed toll lanes on Highway 101 draw opposition

By **Melissa Hartman**

Staff Writer/melissah@latc.com

A Caltrans project in the works for more than 10 years is just now catching the eye of many concerned residents of Santa Clara and San Mateo counties who would be affected by it – toll lanes on Highway 101.

Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors President Joe Simitian said the proposal to add toll lanes to major freeways emerged when he sat on a transportation committee as a state senator. He had a bad feeling about the lingering financial effects the fees would have on residents who already had a hard time balancing the expenses of living in Silicon Valley.

“I was concerned that folks who were beginning to look at freeways as revenue sources may squeeze out those who could not afford additional fees,” Simitian said in a phone call with the Town Crier last week. “There was a potential to create two Californias – one for folks who are prosperous and one for folks of modest means. Those who couldn’t afford the fees would be stuck with a second-tier infrastructure.”

(cont. next page)

TOLL LANES

Simitian went as far as writing his own bill in 2010 to prevent carpoolers in California from ever paying tolls. Senate Bill 1245 passed unanimously in the Senate but stalled in the Assembly.

Representatives from both Caltrans – the agency proposing the managed lanes project from Mountain View to San Bruno – and the Metropolitan Transportation Commission said the bill did not give them enough flexibility to continue with their projects.

“That only made me more nervous,” Simitian said. “It gave a legitimacy to my concern.”

The financial model behind the toll lanes adds up in Simitian’s mind, but that doesn’t mean he supports it.

“I understand there is a rational basis for all of this, and that if we move people into additional lanes that are paid for in part by the cost of tolls, they can make their own market-based decisions about what occasions are worth a little extra and what those occasions are,” he said.

Simitian’s voting record proves he has stayed the course in trying to eliminate extra fees for his constituents; he was in the minority of Bay Area officeholders who opposed the regional Measure 3 on the June 5 ballot. The measure, which passed, raises bridge tolls and funds construction of toll lanes, among other traffic mitigation efforts.

Simitian still views the tax as regressive because it won’t hurt the pocketbooks of the financially comfortable, but it could be consequential for many area residents who already have a hard time making ends meet.

Taking a toll on traffic

Caltrans spokesman Jeff Weiss said the toll lanes are the most effective option the agency can offer at this time to address traffic congestion, which makes the fees that much more necessary.

Caltrans’ aim is to increase its “person throughput,” or the amount of carpoolers, not cars, circulating on 101. Adding a toll lane rather than a carpool lane is “the only way to make that happen,” Weiss said last week.

San Mateo County Supervisor David Canepa challenged Caltrans’ justification for the toll road. The agency based its



MEGAN V. WINSLOW/TOWN CRIER

Caltrans’ proposal to install a new toll lane that would connect to an existing, modified carpool lane on Highway 101 is facing opposition from local leaders like Joe Simitian, president of the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors.

rationale on the environmental report conducted for the project, which contended that the only option to eradicate the Bay Area’s overwhelming traffic is toll lanes.

Canepa took to social media to reply to his constituents posting messages of support for him after he publicly voiced his opposition to the lanes. He thanked a Twitter user July 23 who recognized his “sanity on toll lanes,” which the tweeter said should be called “the Facebook lane.” Canepa tweeted back: “Carpool lanes are fine but #NoToll.”

The same day, Canepa acknowledged the tweet of a reporter who quoted him saying, “I’m not a rocket scientist, I’m just a supervisor, but if the goal is to move people and get them to carpool, then why not just do a carpool lane?”

Canepa added in his reply tweet that it’s time to discuss whether toll lanes are the right way to manage congestion on 101. He tagged Caltrans’ District 4 Twitter account in search of a response.

Weiss pointed to the “flexibility” of toll lanes over carpool lanes, noting that toll lanes accommodate vehicles for a small fee when traffic is light, while carpool lanes have extended hours when cars with only two or more people can drive in them.

The most common complaints Caltrans hears from commuters are that they can’t afford to pay the toll and they can’t find people to carpool with. Detractors would still benefit from the addition of toll lanes, Weiss said, as they would reduce the number of cars traveling in lanes they could still access.

The Caltrans-provided map for the SM 101 Managed Lanes project reveals that a new lane would be installed only along 101 between Interstate 380 in South San Francisco and San Antonio Road in Palo Alto. The lane would connect to Santa Clara County by transitioning the existing carpool lane from Menlo Park to Rengstorff Avenue in Mountain View into a toll lane – meaning no extra lane installation on that stretch.

Spring construction

Why is a project in the works for so long suddenly drawing scrutiny from residents? It’s difficult for Caltrans to arouse the interest of busy residents until a project is right under their noses, Simitian concluded.

“Understandably, people lead busy lives and aren’t focused on highway improvements years away, but now they’re anxious,” he said.

Weiss said Caltrans has done its part to encourage the debate, opening a public comment period from November 2017 to January 2018, prior to revisions on the environmental report, which prompted an extension of the public comment window to Thursday.

Caltrans held three public meetings on the project and placed ads in the San Francisco Chronicle, San Mateo’s The Daily Journal and The Mercury News, Weiss said. He spoke with two television reporters himself to spread awareness of the project’s progress. No more public meetings will be scheduled at this time.

Caltrans expects construction to begin next spring, with an anticipated price tag of \$534 million. The project likely will wrap up by early 2022.