

EAST VALLEY Tribune

Roads spat splits Valley

By Garin Groff, Tribune

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The east versus west fight over the Valley's regional transportation plan intensified Wednesday as Mesa renewed a threat to leave the plan and spearhead an East Valley-only transportation system.

That would kill a regional plan for \$17.1 billion worth of transportation projects that voters would face next year — but Mesa Mayor Keno Hawker said it may be the only way the East Valley will get its fair share of projects.

The idea of an East Valley-only plan came during a meeting of Valley mayors who were supposed to hammer out differences in the 20-year transportation plan that involves extending a half-cent sales tax. Instead, mayors argued their cities were getting cheated in the deal or complained other communities got more than their fair share.

The East Valley is short \$300 million for multiple road widening projects, Hawker said, an amount that he said must be changed or Mesa will draw a plan — and tax — of its own. The plan likely would involve Scottsdale and other East Valley cities, he said. It's also possible Phoenix could join a new coalition, he said.

"We will recover a lot more revenue," Hawker said. "We'll keep it and spend it on our projects and have money left over."

East Valley taxpayers are subsidizing projects in Phoenix and the West Valley now, he said, adding the East Valley has 34 percent of the Maricopa County's population but would get about 31 percent of the transportation tax revenue if the sales tax is extended.

The West Valley complained it also is fighting for its fair share.

An angry Glendale Mayor Elaine Scruggs accused transportation planners at the Maricopa Association of Governments of unprofessionally dismissing the West Valley's needs by calling a proposed freeway south of Interstate 10 a "piggy project." The freeway is a vital regional link, she said.

The regional plan is being developed by elected officials and business leaders who serve on MAG's Transportation Policy Committee.

The committee faces a Sept. 17 deadline to vote on the plan in the process to get it to voters. Many members said they are optimistic they can compromise but admitted the plan is threatened because many cities are unhappy with their share of projects.

Committee members said they hope to unanimously support the regional plan, which must go to the Arizona Legislature to be placed on the ballot. But some members said the regional feuding at Wednesday's meeting showed a unanimous vote is unlikely.

"You're going to have some major split votes," Scruggs said.

Members said they fear a split vote on their part would open up the plan for attack at the Legislature or at the ballot box.

Hawker said it was possible the regional plan will hold together. During a public forum on the plan Wednesday night, Hawker noted several participants asked that the plan include more East Valley funding.

Those calling for the money included former Mesa Vice Mayor Jim Davidson and Tom Dorn, of the East Valley Chambers of

Commerce. Dorn said East Valley businesses are concerned about the gap.

"We want to make sure it is an equitable plan for the next 20 years," Dorn said.

Nearly every member of the committee, composed mostly of mayors, pushed Wednesday for more money or for a faster timetable in his or her community. Gilbert Mayor Steve Berman said the plan is a good deal for his town, but he pushed to get earlier construction dates on HOV lanes and intersection improvements. The town will get the last stretch of freeway under the current transportation tax and is scheduled to be among the last to get wider freeways in the next 20 years.

"Gilbert has been waiting over 20 years to get its first inch of asphalt," Berman said. "Now it's Gilbert's turn to move up a little bit in the phasing."

The committee did find one nugget of good news Wednesday: It appears to have adequate financing for the first time. The plan had a shortfall of \$789 million, but planners found new revenue and cost reductions that put the plan \$94 million in the black.

That sort of finding gave Hawker hope that the committee will feel comfortable spending more money in the East Valley.

"We would really like to be a regional participant and I really do hope the regional plan holds together," Hawker said.