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FACT SHEET—Fresno Voters Give Voice to Budget Preferences

Introduction

This report presents results from the second large and random sample survey conducted in the City of Fresno since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic: the Fresno Speaks Survey. The Fresno Speaks project is carried out as a partnership between the UC Merced Community and Labor Center and the Fresno County Civic Engagement Table, which includes Communities for a New California, Faith in the Valley, Fresno Metro Black Chamber of Commerce, Jakara Movement, Hmong Innovating Politics, and Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability.

From July to August 2021, the study surveyed 1,520 registered voters with phones residing in the city of Fresno on a range of community, health, civic and budgeting issues. The margin of error is +/-3 points at the city level. The Fresno Speaks survey also predicted the outcome of the gubernatorial recall election in the city within less than a percentage point.¹

The study finds that voters' main concern continues to be the coronavirus pandemic based on responses to open-ended qualitative questions and multiple-choice questions in terms of health, safety, and economic losses.² In the midst of the global public health crisis, respondents also weighed in on the distribution and investments of local tax initiatives: the county wide Transportation Tax (Measure "C") and the Cannabis Tax (Measure "A").

For Measure C, voters prioritized (1) fixing existing streets and roads in low-income neighborhoods (2) investments that did not contribute to air pollution and climate change. For the Cannabis Tax (Measure "A"), voters most frequently chose to invest the funds in mental health services. These same findings are also found at the city council level of analysis for both tax measures.

Measure C – County Transportation Tax

Measure C is a countywide sales tax to improve transportation infrastructure, initially approved

¹ See [UCM Community and Labor Center Press Release](#), "UCM Community and Labor Center Accurately Forecasts Voter Preferences in Fresno within One Percentage Point." October 2021.

² The open-ended question asked, "What is the most important issue facing your household?" Nearly 30 percent of respondents (28.2%) stated the coronavirus or health as the most important issue, far more than any other theme. In

a related multiple-choice question, voters were asked, "If you take a look at this list of issues and think for a moment, which issue has had the largest negative impact upon your household?" Again, out of the options presented, one in three respondents (33%) chose "coronavirus" as the most frequent answer. The next closest response was "crime and violence," which 15 percent chose. These results were also consistent across city council districts.

by voters in 1986 and re-approved in 2006. The funds are collected by a half-cent retail tax in the county. At the time of re-approval, a coalition of local community groups successfully negotiated that the city of Fresno divide the post 2006 allocations into three parts: local roads, highways, and alternative programs.

In 2020, Measure C raised \$23 million for the city of Fresno, in 2021 revenues are estimated at \$50.7 million, and in 2022 it is expected to generate \$36.5 million.³ The tax constitutes 2.2 percent of the proposed 2021-2022 Fresno city budget. The main funds (not including regional investment plans and other funds that could impact the city) are allocated for mass public transportation upgrades, repair of roads and streets, bike lanes, pedestrian trails, and airport infrastructure.

The Measure C Expenditure program shows that from 2007-27, the planned expenditure for regional public transit accounts for 24% of the budget, with 24.8% of that funding going to the City of Fresno. The Regional transportation program – highway expansion and maintenance of major road corridors – would receive 30.4% of funds, over 50% of which would go to urban areas. Finally, 6% will go to consolidating county rail lines (Alternative Transportation) and a mere 3.5% for Environmental Enhancement Programs.⁴

We asked registered voters how they would like to see the Measure C transportation tax funds invested in the city in a multiple-choice question. The question asked, “The county of Fresno has a half-cent sales tax to help fund transportation projects (Measure C). How might funds from this tax best be spent to improve the lives of members of your household?” Respondents were asked to choose one priority from several options. Table 1 summarizes responses.

Table 1. Responses to Best Way to Invest Transportation Tax (Measure C)

Issue	Percent
Improvements to existing streets and roads especially in low-income areas	49.2%
Transportation projects that improve air quality and don't contribute to climate change	22.4%
Improved bike lanes, sidewalks, streetlights	11.2%
Improved and more frequent bus, vanpool and rideshare services and routes	10.9%
Highway Expansion	6.2%

N=1,495

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center Analysis of Fresno Speaks 2021 data

Nearly half of all respondents (49%) prefer the Measure C funds are invested in streets and roads in low-income communities. The second most common response was to distribute the transportation funds in projects that mitigate air pollution and do not contribute to climate change. The results, prioritizing low-income communities and investing in climate and air quality solutions, held up across city council districts.

In five out of seven of the city council districts (districts 1, 3, 4, 5 and 7) half of voters or more chose improvements to streets and roads in low-income neighborhoods. These same preferences also held up across age, income, race/ethnicity, and education levels of voters. It appears that Fresno City residents’ desired policy focus for Measure C funds is in investments that are equitable and people-centered investments that promote public health and the environment.⁵

³ See, [Mayor’s Proposed Fiscal Year 2022 Budget, City of Fresno, California.](#)

⁴ See p.3 of, <https://measurec.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/2006-Measure-C-Extension-Expenditure-Plan-2007-2027.pdf>

⁵ See, Blumenberg, Evelyn (2017). “Social Equity and Urban Transportation,” *The Geography of Urban Transportation*, 4th Edition, eds. Susan Hanson and Genevieve Giuliano. New York: The Guilford Press.

Finally, highway expansion was the least desirable investment option for Measure C by voters across the seven city council districts. The lack of support for highway expansion should be incorporated into current and future policy debates. This would include discussions about the distribution of Measure C funds and the upcoming renewal of the Measure. Additionally, as over 22% of voters favor projects that improve air quality and do not contribute to climate change, more than 3.5% of Measure C funds should be devoted to these programs.

Beyond the budget of Measure C, the relatively low level of support for highway expansion compared to improving basic road infrastructure in low-income regions and supporting environmentally friendly transportation should also be considered by policy makers for how *regional transportation funds* are allocated.

Table 2. Responses to Best Way to Invest Marijuana Tax (Measure A)

Investment Target	Percent
Mental health services	37.3%
More after school and summer youth programs	28.0%
Improving streets, sidewalks, and streetlights	16.0%
More police	14.4%
Improved bus services and routes	4.5%

N=1,498

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center Analysis of Fresno Speaks 2021 data

Measure A – City Cannabis Business License Tax

In 2018, the city of Fresno voted to approve a sales tax on Cannabis products sold within the city. 90% of the Measure A tax is to be used for police, fire, parks, roads, and reducing the problems of gang violence, homelessness, drug abuse, and human trafficking. The remaining 10% is earmarked for a

special community benefit fund.⁶ The Measure A tax funds are projected to generate \$10 million dollars a year for the city budget.

We asked voters in a multiple-choice response question what would be the best way to use these funds to improve the lives of members of their household? Voters’ first choice was to invest in mental health services (37%), and more after school programs was the second choice (28%).⁷ These first two preferences also held up across city council districts in the same order. These results should inform the Fresno City Council and the Fresno Mayor on voter preferences in how to distribute the Measure A funds.

In summary, the budgetary priorities of Fresno voters citywide center on equity: investments in low-income communities, people centered infrastructure, social services around mental health and youth programs, with a commitment to reducing poor air quality and addressing climate change at the local level. Investing in highway expansion and law enforcement were low priorities for Fresno voters.

Mission Statement

The UC Merced Community and Labor Center conducts research and education on issues of community, labor and employment, in the San Joaquin Valley and beyond.

⁶[https://ballotpedia.org/Fresno, California, Measure A, Marijuana Business Tax](https://ballotpedia.org/Fresno,_California,_Measure_A,_Marijuana_Business_Tax) (November 2018)

⁷ In the [2020 Fresno Speaks survey](#), this same question was asked without the option of mental health services. The

preferred choice (42%) by voters was “more after school and summer youth programs.” Improving streets and sidewalks came in second place (30%) and more police came in third place (17%).