

LOCAL / CITY HALL

L.A. city and county polls diverge sharply in support for funding homelessness programs



A homeless man in downtown L.A.'s Pershing Square. (Mark Boster / Los Angeles Times)

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With homelessness rising throughout Los Angeles, elected officials at both the city and county level say they may soon ask voters to pay higher taxes to help move people off the streets.

A pair of polls released Friday suggest they could get very different answers.

Fewer than half of surveyed Los Angeles city voters would support a ballot measure raising money for efforts to reduce homelessness, according to a poll reviewed by The Times — a meager show of support that calls into question the city's 10-year, \$2-billion plan to house L.A.'s tens of thousands of homeless people.

The results diverged starkly from those in a separate poll published Friday by Los Angeles County, which is pursuing its own strategy. The county's poll showed strong support for possible countywide tax

measures to fund homelessness programs, including a "millionaire's tax" and a levy on marijuana sales.

The number of homeless people countywide increased 12% from 2013 to 2015, to more than 44,000, according to Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority surveys. Officials in the city and county passed parallel plans to address the region's homeless crisis earlier this year but have been struggling with how to pay for the efforts in the long term.

The city theoretically could share in revenue generated by a county measure. But the low level of voter support for new revenue sources indicated in the city's poll could prove crippling to an ambitious plan, adopted by Mayor [Eric Garcetti](#) and the City Council earlier this year, to pour billions into long-term housing and services for homeless Angelenos.

The city poll, co-sponsored by the California Community Foundation, was conducted in late March and delivered to officials last week. In it, the percentage of city voters backing of potential tax and bond measures fell far short of the two-thirds supermajority required under California law.

Those surveyed ranked homelessness as the most important issue in the city, second only to education. More than two-thirds said they saw more homeless people on the streets than they did a few years ago. Yet those concerns didn't translate into readiness to open their wallets.

Garcetti spokeswoman Connie Llanos said in a statement that the mayor was encouraged by the urgency with which surveyed voters viewed homelessness as a social problem. The statement did not address whether Garcetti thought a ballot measure should be delayed in light of the low poll numbers.

Only 49% of city voters surveyed said they would support either raising the sales tax or approving a general-obligation bond to fund the city's homeless plan. That number dropped to 47% when voters were asked whether they would approve a third option: a transfer tax on real-estate documents.

"I've never seen a measure that polled at 50% at the outset of the campaign and grew to 66.6% by the end of the campaign. I think that that's impossible," said former county Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, who led the campaign in 2002 for Measure B, which taxed some forms of construction to fund emergency medical care.

City officials repeatedly have said that they do not have sufficient money in their existing budget to fund their homeless strategy, and that they are depending on voters to approve a new revenue source. When Garcetti released his budget proposal this week, his administration emphasized that the \$138 million allocated to homelessness programs was a one-time expenditure that could not be replicated in future years.

"While the mayor's budget was an initial step toward building that infrastructure, it's only that: an initial

step," said City Administrative Officer Miguel Santana, who wrote the city's plan to create long-term housing for the homeless. "The plan cannot be executed to the level that's been proposed without the new revenue."

But even if the city cannot find adequate funding on its own, it may be able to rely on some county or state help, Santana said.

County Supervisor [Mark Ridley-Thomas](#) said he envisions part of the proceeds of a countywide funding measure going to the cities, including a "considerable proportion" to the city of Los Angeles. It's not yet clear how the money would be divided.

The results of the separate county poll, Ridley-Thomas said, "suggest that there is a healthy desire to address the issue of homelessness in the county of Los Angeles."

"That suggests to me that we have to roll up our sleeves and do the work of getting it on the ballot and getting it passed, and then the work of implementing the will of the voters," he said.

The county-commissioned poll, conducted by the firm David Binder Research in consultation with Evitarus, asked 1,400 likely November voters whether they would support several different funding options that could pay for homeless housing and services. The options included a half-percent tax increase on income over \$1 million; a half-cent sales tax increase; a 15% sales tax on marijuana; and a \$49 parcel tax.

The so-called millionaires' tax garnered the most support, with 76% of respondents saying they would support it, but it would require approval by state lawmakers before it could go forward. The sales tax received 68% support and the marijuana tax 66%. A proposed property tax fared less well, with 47% support.

The projected revenue that could be raised by a tax measure range from \$243 million a year from the income tax to \$746 million for a half-cent sales tax, county analysts said last month. The property tax would raise an estimated \$274 million a year. County officials did not have an estimate of what amount would be raised by a marijuana tax.

Some of the supervisors had voiced concerns that a homeless initiative would compete with other funding items that are expected to appear on the November ballot, including tax measures for county parks and transportation projects and an extension of a statewide income tax increase passed in 2012. They worried about voter fatigue. But the pollsters found that other measures did not appear to have an effect on voters' support for homeless funding.

The county's proposed budget for the coming fiscal year includes about \$100 million for its homeless

plan. But county officials estimate that about \$500 million a year would be needed to fill the gap in housing for homeless people, and that does not include construction costs.

If city officials decide they want time to build support for a homelessness funding measure, they could postpone their ballot initiative to the next municipal election in March. Yet that could also risk such a measure's odds of success since lower-turnout elections often are decided by older, wealthier and more tax-averse voters, said Dan Schnur, director of the Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics at USC.

"The conventional wisdom is that high-turnout elections are generally better for tax measures," Schnur said. "Under most circumstances, a high-turnout presidential election should be the ideal circumstance to pass an initiative like this."

The county's poll did find, in fact, that support for the proposed millionaire's tax and sales tax was lower among likely March voters than among the larger pool of those expected to vote in November.

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