

# THE SACRAMENTO BEE

## Folsom's rejection of a sales tax measure is a stunning rebuke of its leadership elite

Opinion By Sacramento Bee, By Tom Philp - Updated November 08, 2024 11:53 AM



Folsom Mayor Rosario Rodriguez, center (Mike Kozlowski to the left), after being selected as mayor at a special City Council meeting on Monday, Dec. 12, 2022. There was muted support overall by this council for the Measure G sales tax increase. ALEX MUEGGE Sacramento Bee file

Folsom, one of the Sacramento region's shining exurbs, finds itself facing a grouchy electorate and some severe looming budget problems.

In a stunning rebuke of the city's political and business establishment which has controlled all things Folsom for decades, voters appear to be resoundingly defeating a one-cent sales tax increase intended to maintain city services and help fund economic development.

The city's leadership elite may have picked precisely the wrong time to go to the voters asking for money, for at the very top of the ballot, there happened to be a winning candidate for president delivering an angry national message that gained historic traction.

"There were some macro things going on in the world," said Folsom Mayor Mike Kozlowski. "The heavy Republican part of Folsom was being told nonstop for the last year that inflation was a problem, their pocketbooks were being attacked, the economy was bad. It stokes that concern among tax levels."

Folsom, with its charming historic district, spectacular bike trails and countless outlet stores, now finds itself on a financial path more befitting a disadvantaged community, with the mayor predicting deeper and deeper cuts to city services in the coming years as the city's structural financial problems worsen.

To make matters worse, an anchor of the city's economy, the giant Intel semiconductor manufacturer, recently announced plans to eliminate 272 local positions as the company managed to lose nearly \$17 billion in a single quarter.

OPINION: The looming failure of Measure G represents the second time in six years that Folsom voters have rejected a sales tax to supplement the city budget. In Sacramento County, Folsom and Citrus Heights remain the only two cities without a local sales tax as a funding base. The city of Roseville in Placer County, long considered a peer exurb of Folsom for its economic vitality and residential quality of life, has its own local sales tax. The city of Sacramento has repeatedly approved such taxes.

Based on incomplete results released early Wednesday morning, 60% of Folsom ballots had voted against Measure G, and only 39% in support.

So what gives in Folsom? Do truly prefer a city that provides declining levels of services than a sales tax increase? Or has the Folsom City Council, understandably afraid of its electorate, never stuck its neck out and made a compelling case why it needs a new revenue stream?

Paralysis on the City Council on the sales tax subject for months on end prompted an all-star cast of city residents last winter to take the matter into their own hands. Known as Folsom Takes Action, led by former city parks director Robert Goss, the group fashioned a sales tax measure that had all the markings of potential success.

The additional funds, for example, would go to all popular causes such as police, fire, parks, streets and economic development. An independent oversight board would monitor the spending. The list of supporters reads like a Who's Who of Folsom, including most former living mayors, Folsom resident/District Attorney Thien Ho, the Chamber of Commerce.

They faced opposition that offered boilerplate reasons for why a city doesn't need additional tax revenue. "The budget is balanced." "Live within your means." "Ballot box budgeting."

The generic opposition messages in this unique moment managed to strike home.

In hindsight, the citizen activists and all the heavy hitters behind Measure G could have used some full-throated endorsements and campaigning by the entire city council.

“The council support, while unanimous for the measure, was not vocal,” said Mayor Kozlowski, who was a frequent public speaker advocating for Measure G. “Let’s put it that way.”

The city’s police union did not formally support Measure G, despite how it provided additional funding. Apparently the support was not enough. Talk about digging your own grave.

And then there was The Trump Factor, a candidate riding a wave of populism and anger back to the White House.

“It’s a mandate,” said the mayor. “I am trying to be philosophical.”

Folsom’s operating budget is about \$117 million. Most of it is tied up in the salaries of its employees. And because the city is inhabited by legions of fiscal hawks, there is not a lot of fat and frills in this budget. When comparing the number of city employees to the number of Folsom residents, as one metric, the staff size is down 38% since 2008.

If Folsom residents truly want a city that provides less for them, that is precisely what they have voted to get.

“If the trends continue, we will have a large budget deficit two, three and four years from now,” Kozlowski said.

But maybe, just maybe, Folsom residents love their community so much to ultimately invest in its future through a sales tax increase. Maybe the true gravity of the fiscal situation has not yet dawned upon them.

The mayor rightfully is not giving up hope.

Sometimes things have to get worse before they get better. Sometimes the third time, in this case another sales tax initiative on some future ballot, is the proverbial charm. Sometimes a city council finally grows a spine and defends what it needs.

Folsom is better than this.

Yet for now, this once steady city is simply another cranky community that has managed to push itself dangerously close to the brink.

*A previous version incorrectly stated that all former living mayors had formally supported Measure G.*

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