

ART ballot question won't halt the project

Andy Lyman

November 1, 2016

Voters in Bernalillo County get to vote on a question regarding Albuquerque's controversial rapid transit project—but the results will have little to no effect on the project itself.

The ballot question asks voters if they are in favor of putting the controversial Albuquerque Rapid Transit (ART) project to a vote in future elections. Even if the majority of voters in the county are in favor of voting on ART, the Albuquerque City Council would not be required to add the proposal to any future ballots.

The actual question asks voters, “Are you in favor of giving voters residing in the City of Albuquerque municipal limits the chance to vote in support of or opposition to the proposed Albuquerque Rapid Transit project?”

Even if the question receives a resounding ‘yes’ when results come in next week, there is nothing on the ballot that can stop the project from moving forward. The question’s sponsor County Commissioner Debbie O’Malley said she wanted to send a message to Albuquerque Mayor Berry on behalf of business owners who still oppose the project.

“I was hoping the mayor would rethink and respond to folks that feel like they haven’t been responded to,” O’Malley said.

O’Malley is quick to admit that Berry hasn’t shown any signs of slowing down the transit project, which began heavy construction earlier this month, and that an advisory question will not likely make a difference.

“It looks like he’s going to move forward,” O’Malley said.

Even if the question was binding, the city council, not the county commission would be the body to stop funding to ART.

“It’s basically out of the county’s hands and it looks like it’s out of the communities hands,” O’Malley said.

Still, the county commission approved O’Malley’s question for the general election ballot. The question does not ask the city to propose a binding question, but O’Malley said she wanted to give a voice to the general public.

“At least this is a way for them to voice their concerns,” O’Malley said.

Since the inception of ART, there have been a series of community meetings to give the public a chance to weigh-in.

The Rio Grande Foundation, a free-market research organization, was one of the earlier and more staunch opposition voices in Albuquerque. The group previously sponsored a presentation by a speaker from the Cato Institute last year, before the ART project was approved. Rio Grande Foundation Executive Director Paul Gessing told *NM Political Report* in an email he also sees this as an opportunity for the public to make themselves heard.

“It is unfortunate that Albuquerque voters were never given a chance by their City elected officials to vote on such a transformative project for their City, but given the willingness of Mayor Berry and 7 of the 9 members of the City Council to steamroll what seems to be strong public opposition to the project, having even a non-binding vote on ART is better than nothing,” Gessing wrote.

But, Gessing said, it may be too late to stop construction that is currently taking place along Central Avenue, even with a binding ballot question.

“Unfortunately, barring a miracle, the project will be far along in its construction phase before that final vote is held,” Gessing said.