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Metro drivers: Tax us and build more transit

58 percent of respondents in 11-county metro area would favor penny tax for buses and trains

By BRIAN FEAGANS
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
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Motorists in metro Atlanta aren't just venting about the nation's second worst commute. They're willing to pay more at the cash register for buses and trains that could help alleviate it, according to an 11-county survey released today.

Asked if they would support a 1 percent sales tax to fund a specific lists of transportation projects, including rail and bus service, 58 percent of respondents said 'yes.' That support held across the region, from inner counties such as DeKalb and Fulton to the suburbs of Henry and Fayette, the survey found. And it cut across gender, race, age and income level as well.

Do you favor penny sales taxes for more buses and trains?

- Yes
- No

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Voter Limit: Once per Hour
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The survey of 4,123 registered voters was conducted in March for the Transit Planning Board, a two-year-old body of transportation planners and elected officials charged with developing a transit vision for metro Atlanta and finding ways to fund it.

"There's always been the north end vs. the south end, what there was downtown Atlanta vs. what's happening in [Gwinnett County](#)," said [Clayton County](#) Commission Chairman Eldrin Bell, chair of the TPB. "This puts many of those arguments to rest. Now we are a tapestry, a quilt if you will, of woven feelings about transportation."

The survey comes less than a month after a narrow, last-minute vote in the [General Assembly](#) killed legislation to allow regions in Georgia to tax themselves to fund transportation projects.

Many observers believe the measure got bogged down in Senate vs. House politics. But also working against passage was concern about how individual counties could opt out of a regional tax.

Gov. Sonny Perdue opposed the idea, arguing that a new sales tax would be unwise in a slowing economy and would unfairly burden rural residents who shop in urban areas. In addition, he said it would be a mistake to pump more money into a state Department of Transportation in need of a major overhaul.

Cheryl King, staff director of the transit board, said the new survey should help eliminate another lingering concern she heard from some legislators: that voters wouldn't rally behind a sales tax.

"There's no secret that the Atlanta region is different than other parts of the state," King said. "If our problem is so bad that we want to tax ourselves to take care of it, why shouldn't we be able to?"

The transit board is holding public comment sessions on a wide-ranging plan that would roughly double the costs of transit in the region to \$54 billion. The plan calls for expanding MARTA in three directions, lacing the region with bus lines and adding light rail networks that link spots within metro Atlanta and connect it to more distant places such as Athens and Gainesville.

The survey's question about a 1 cent-on-the-dollar sales tax put a time limit on the tax, when it would terminate without reapproval by voters. Some 36 percent of respondents said they still opposed the idea, while 6 percent said they needed more information or were undecided.

The sales tax concept had the greatest support in DeKalb, with 62 percent in support and 32 percent against, along with Spalding (61 to 32 percent) and Clayton (60 to 36) counties. Enthusiasm waned a bit in Rockdale (56 to 38), Henry (54 to 41) and Fayette (50 to 44) counties.

The survey also polled voters on their commuting habits and feelings about congestion and funding possibilities. Some 85 percent said increased investment in transportation options would strengthen the economy and reduce [traffic](#).

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Cobb County Chairman Sam Olens, who sits on the transit board, said greater leadership is needed from the Capitol. "I think that what we've had from the state is a vision that if we do nothing, people will continue coming with those high-paying jobs," he said. "We have more darn plans ... What we need is construction."

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