

Pinellas likely to vote on sales tax for rail and bus service

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A sales tax increase to fund expanded bus service and light rail in Pinellas County seems destined for the November 2014 ballot.

On Wednesday, before a room packed with dozens of mass transit advocates and opponents, the county's transportation agency unanimously voted to ask the Pinellas County Commission to put the question to voters on Nov. 4, 2014.

Of the seven commissioners, five already have said they will support putting the referendum on the ballot. The vote came after nearly three hours of public comment and discussion among the agency's 15 members.

"This is just the first step," said Julie Bujalski, a PSTA board member and Dunedin city commissioner. "Nothing is in stone at this point. It's just about time that we focus and sum it up and make decisions."

The board has long discussed proposing a one-cent sales tax increase, which would raise the sales tax from seven to eight cents and generate about \$120 million for the Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority. It would replace the property tax that currently brings in \$32 million in transit funding a year. Long-debated as a way to pay for a commuter light rail system and improved busing, the proposed tax increase has sparked passionate responses from both sides. More than 100 people packed a meeting room in PSTA's headquarters Wednesday, filling every chair and lining walls. Many wore blue "Try Transit" stickers handed out by the Sierra Club in St. Petersburg. Others wore red "No tax for tracks" buttons.

Supporters said the sales tax increase is needed to pay for more bus routes and more frequent stops. Without it, PSTA executive director Brad Miller said, the agency will have to make deep cuts to busing. By 2015, he said, the agency will have an \$8 million budget gap. And by 2016, he may have to cut bus service by 30 percent.

Mass transit advocates also championed the tax increase as a way to fund a proposed light rail system — 24 miles of track stretching from downtown Clearwater to the

Gateway area, and then south again to St. Petersburg and Tropicana Field — that is still in development.

"We are not opposed to a good idea even if it may cost more," said **Jim Dickson**, co-chair of the St. Petersburg Area Chamber of Commerce's transportation committee.

"Bottleneck and gridlock are not efficient and cost effective," he said. "It is not good for business, it's not good for our tourism industry, and it certainly is not good for our environment."

Opponents warned that public sentiment is against light rail, citing Hillsborough residents' rejection of a tax hike for commuter rail two years ago.

"We all know that our grocery bills are up, our income is down," said Sharon Haske, a St. Petersburg resident and member of the South Pinellas 912 Patriots, a group aligned with the Tea Party movement.

Haske said she has seen other cities build mass transit systems that fail to reduce traffic, but successfully swallow millions in tax dollars.

"The only people that really make out in this are developers," she said. "Taxpayers don't."

A December poll sponsored by the *Tampa Bay Times*, Bay News 9 and AM 820 News Tampa Bay found that 60 percent of Pinellas residents said they would support using tax money for rail. Another 33 percent opposed it. The same poll found that a majority of Hillsborough residents would also back rail. Some speakers said they were still waiting to be sold on the idea.

Keith Burnett, president of Suncoast Architecture & Engineering in Clearwater, predicted the referendum will fail if PSTA can't convince people who aren't already mass transit users that light rail will benefit them. "If you want other people's money to be spent, you've got to sell the other people," he said. "You haven't done that yet."

Pinellas County Commissioner Karen Seel has said that she will vote against placing the tax increase question on the 2014 ballot, calling the timing "premature." And though he voted Wednesday to send the matter to the commission, Commissioner Norm Roche ultimately may not endorse the idea of putting the tax increase to a vote.

"I'm comfortable with the referendum timeline and will support it, provided that all pending questions are answered, all numbers and projections are realistic, and all facts are on the table," he wrote in an email. He said he doesn't think the project's current cost estimates are accurate.

The other five Pinellas commissioners have said they will vote to put the referendum on the 2014 ballot.