

Transit Tax Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and Answers

- How much will the transit tax cost the average Cobb County household, on an annual basis?

According to U.S. Census Bureau, the average household income in Cobb County is \$113,918. If the full one percent of the transit tax was to apply for the average household, the annual tax would be \$1,139. However, there are a number of expenses that are not subject to the sales tax, which would make the tax burden considerably lower. They include, and these are approximate figures, 15% for Federal taxes, 35% for the average mortgage, 6% for state income tax, 6% for the current Cobb sales tax, and 6% for school, county and municipal property taxes, giving us a total of 68% of income that would not be subject to the tax. Add to that a car loan payment, credit card debt, transportation fuel costs, labor costs for services provided on such items as home and car maintenance, and we come up with a very rough figure of only about 25% of income being subject to the tax, or \$284 for the average household income in Cobb County. With the tax being imposed for 30 years, that would cost \$8,520 in constant 2023 dollars.

It should be noted that the Cobb Taxpayers Association (CTA) has repeatedly asked the County, in public forums, how much the tax burden would be, because we reason that the County has access to data that would make the estimate more accurate. However, the County has refused to answer the question, and we suspect the reason is that if taxpayers knew the answer, they would vote against the tax. Moreover, we believe that taxpayers have a right to know how much it will cost them, and that the only way we can make an informed decision on whether to vote for or against the tax is to have that information readily available. By the same token, you wouldn't walk into a car dealership and buy a car if you didn't first know how much it would cost. Neither should you be expected to vote for a tax when those who advocate for it are unwilling to tell you what it will cost you.

- How much do you anticipate increased ridership with implementation of the tax?

While there is no doubt that a very expensive expansion of the public transportation system in Cobb County would lead to increased ridership, once again the County is mum on this question. By way of comparison, if a private retail establishment was looking to expand its number of stores in the County, you can be sure that it would develop sophisticated marketing studies to determine if such an expansion would be profitable. While mass transit expansion is not based on a profit metric, (and would indeed greatly increase the amount of subsidization of the service) taxpayers, at a bare minimum, need to know how many people, and how frequently, they would use the service.

However, for the sake of argument, let's assume that one percent of Cobb's population used the expanded transit service (7,000 people) on a daily basis to get to work or school. For \$10 billion over thirty years, that's \$1.4 million for each of the 7,000 people over that time. For that kind of money, the County could buy each of them a limo and chauffeur! Yet as with the question on how much the tax would cost the average household, the County is silent (as it is on so many of the questions to follow) on ridership by not even providing an estimate or approximation.

- Do some of the routes planned duplicate and/or replace existing bus service?

At least one route considered by the County would replace the old route 65 that ran from the Marietta Transfer Station to the Merchants Walk area in East Cobb and points beyond, running along Roswell Road. That route was discontinued due to having the lowest number of riders throughout the Cobb Link system.

- If the transit tax is passed, will that result in the end of the current subsidy for bus service from the general fund, and will that savings result in a reduction of the millage rate?

That is the \$30 million dollar a year question, which is about the amount of taxpayer subsidy coming out of the general fund to prop up the Cobb Link system. However, communications with current Cobb County Commissioners indicate that they do not believe the County is currently taxing its citizens enough to pay for what it considers vital and essential services, including social welfare spending on food, rent, shelter, and the like, so we believe it is unlikely the current Board of Commissioners would use the windfall to provide needed and welcome relief for taxpayers.

- How much of a subsidy per trip cost be if the tax is implemented? How much is it now?

We do know that the taxpayer subsidy per trip on the current system is 89.3% based on 2022 data, with fare box collections only covering 10.7% of the cost. The County remains silent on how much of a subsidy it would be if the tax was passed. We do know, however, that the \$30 million subsidy the County is currently providing would be replaced with a sales tax revenue stream of \$200 million annually, meaning that the current tax burden would increase by close to 700%.

- How many rides are provided by the current system and approximately how many rides would be provided when all the projects are completed if the transit tax were to pass?

The most current complete annual data is for 2022, when the number of passenger trips provided was 993,547, or a little more than one trip per year per resident. This represents a dramatic decline in ridership from 2,543,584 in 2018. While the pandemic can be blamed for much of the decline in ridership, the number of increased ridership in 2023 – the first full year when the pandemic was considered to be over with – has increased only very modestly since 2022.

As for how many rides would be provided if the tax were to pass, the County has provided no projections, which is outrageous in light of the fact that it is asking us to pass a more than \$10 billion tax over a thirty year period.

- What is the number of miles of bus routes being proposed to be built, maintained and operated under the transit tax?

108 miles, or about \$1 billion for every ten miles.

- The population of Cobb has increased dramatically over the past few decades. How does that compare with the level of ridership on our bus system? Has it kept pace with population growth?

While population growth has expanded dramatically, the ratio of number of people using mass transit in Cobb County has markedly declined, following a national trend of declining ridership going back to the early 1950s. This has much to do with rising affluence, which makes private vehicle ownership far more convenient and affordable. By way of example, the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama in the mid 1950s had a crippling impact on the local economy because such a large number of essential workers depended on public transportation. Hence the success of the boycott in achieving its objective of ending segregation. A similar boycott today would be barely noticed.

- How many people who are currently experiencing mobility challenges in Cobb will no longer be faced with that challenge if the tax is passed?

Ask the County. It is the only entity that would even begin to have an answer to that question. We suspect, however, that the number, as a percentage of the population, would be in the very low single digits. So taxpayers need to ask themselves: “Can this multi-billion dollar tax increase proposal be in any way justified, considering how few people will be served?”

We do know, however, that in this regard the County has lied to its citizens when it first rolled out its proposal before the public in August, 2023. It claimed that a senior citizen, living in Powder Springs, who had a doctor’s appointment at the Wellstar Hospital on Austell Road, would have to pay \$52 to Uber, because such a senior citizen “Currently has no access on transit,” whereas transit tax expansion would overcome that obstacle. What the County failed to mention is that it offers a travel voucher program designed specifically to address this need.

- Concerning the dedicated lanes proposed for Bus Rapid Transit (BRT), will that take away traffic lanes that are currently used by private vehicles?

The County claims that the dedicated lanes it proposes to build for BRT will not take real estate away from lanes currently used for traffic. Yet if the County has space to build dedicated lanes, why would it not use that space to add lanes to current roadways for the purpose of alleviating traffic congestion? The thought of a dedicated lane, being used only once every 15 to 30 minutes, alongside bumper to bumper traffic, defies logic and common sense.

- The County proposes implementing technology that will switch traffic signals from red to green to better facilitate a BRT’s movement through an intersection. Yet won’t that serve to impede traffic that is not a BRT?

That question answers itself. Of course it would, meaning that traffic congestion would be made worse if the transit tax was approved.

- The County relies on studies that show the percentage of seniors making up the population in Cobb will increase dramatically from now until 2050, and it is for that reason that the transit tax is needed so that seniors can “age in place.” Yet isn’t this the same demographic that will shun mass transit because of its inconvenience?

There is no doubt that as people get older they are less inclined, and less able, to use mass transit. To that end, the County offers a travel voucher program to meet that need. On the other hand, to spend billions for a service expansion that seniors will not use is a very poor allocation of public resources.

And for seniors living in assisted living residences, these facilities usually offer their own transportation jitneys for its residents, without a taxpayer subsidy.

- In the Atlanta metro area ridership on public transit declined by 8.6% from 2014 - 2019, with even steeper declines since then. Therefore, why does the County advocate a large, long-term tax increase to provide a service that the public is clearly less and less interested in using?

Why indeed. Expanding mass transit, utilizing 20th Century infrastructure to address 21st Century needs is akin to expanding the production of buggy whip manufacturing in the year 1900.

- Concerning micro-transit, which is proposed to replace the Flex bus system the County provided, what makes you think it will be widely used when Flex was used hardly at all, and at a massive subsidy of as much as \$50 per trip?

Two things to consider here. Yes, expanding the Flex Bus system from a small footprint in South Cobb to a much larger footprint which would cover almost the entire County would increase ridership. But it would also increase the net amount of subsidy provided. And with the travel voucher program already in place, what pressing or urgent need would the microtransit service be providing that is not already being provided?

- With microtransit, it is proposed to provide pick up service from the home to the nearest bus stop. Yet once a rider then takes a bus to a location as close as possible to the rider's final destination, how does micro transit plan to get the rider from the bus disembarkation point to the rider's final destination? Does he or she need to call for another microtransit ride?

More unanswered questions for the County. If the answer to last question is "yes" that appears to be incredibly convoluted and inefficient, and would inevitably result in very low utilization.

- The County's proposal provides transit expansion to parts of South and Central Cobb, but no expansion of service to the South Cobb cities of Powder Springs and Austell, and little or nothing for East and West Cobb. What do you say to residents in those areas who will end up footing the bill yet will receive no direct benefit?

The only possible justification for such a large wealth transfer is the altruistic notion that the haves must be required to surrender more and more of their hard earned money to benefit "the less fortunate." Yet with our highly progressive tax code, this is already happening on a massive scale at all levels of government. We do not need to add to this a transit tax. On the contrary, Cobb County citizens should be allowed to keep more and more of the money they have rightfully earned through dent of hard work and accomplishment.

- How many cars does the County's proposal anticipate taking off the roads as a result of this tax and how does it come by that number? What percentage of vehicular traffic is that?

One of the biggest arguments made by transit tax advocates is that it will take cars off the road, leading to less congestion and pollution. This is the mass transit mantra. Yet without any firm data from the County, making such an assumption is pure conjecture. Moreover, putting more empty buses on our roadways will lead to more congestion, not less, and may even lead to less efficient use of fossil fuels. Consider a large, diesel powered bus lumbering down the road with two or three riders in it, verses one or two cars with the same number of passengers.

- Since this tax is a regressive one, in that it dis-proportionately impacts lower income people more than others, and given that the overwhelming majority of low-income people in the County now own cars regardless, how can the County justify a tax for a service which most low-income people have little desire or inclination to use?

The answer is they can't. In fact, studies have shown that giving low-income people a new Toyota Prius every few years would be less expensive than providing them with mass transit, and that would be especially true in a county like Cobb which is predominately an upper income area.

- Of all the people we have spoken to who have used our bus system, they all tell us the same thing; that they can't wait to get to the point where they don't have to take the bus anymore. With that being the case, why would the County look to expand a service that current users can't wait to get to the point where they don't need to use it?

Regarding this question, the elephant in the room is the real issue driving the drive for more public transit. With billions of dollars generated by the tax, there are obviously well established spending interests that hope to garner huge profits by building, maintaining, operating (and in the case of paid consultants by the County, advocating for) expanded mass transit. Then there are property owners along the proposed routes that hope to see their property values increase as a result. And finally there are political forces that would like to see a more urban and transient population in the County that can reliably be counted on to vote for and support a progressive political agenda that calls for ever more expensive and expansive government.

- It has been said that the special interest who will really benefit the most from this tax are the builders who are looking to build massive numbers of new apartments along the BRT routes. What is the County's response to this allegation, and how would it deny that to be the case?

The County claims that is not the case and that there are no plans to change zoning codes to accommodate this change. However, changes in policy usually follows the money, and it would be hard to imagine future Board of Commissioners not responding to this incentive.

- The County argues that large employers and colleges are clamoring for more transit as a means of attracting and retaining talented, high-skilled and well paid workers. How do you respond to this claim?

We take the County at its word that it has received this input, but anecdotal evidence does not bear this out. When conducting informal surveys on KSU and other campuses, respondents have rarely indicated that this would play a role in where they would choose to live or work.

- How much of the money raised by the tax will go to MARTA and how much will stay in the County?

The money raised by this particular tax will not go to directly to MARTA but will go to increase and improve connectivity to MARTA, as the enabling legislation for the tax -- HB 930 -- was ostensibly passed for that purpose. However, taxpayers need to determine if the price for increasing connectivity is worth it. How many people who do not now use public transit to get to jobs in areas directly served by MARTA will now decide to leave their car at home if the tax is passed? Not many.

Another major problem with the idea of increasing connectivity to Atlanta from Cobb is that the Atlanta Metro area is one of the most spread-out metro areas in the World. Unlike older cities like New York that grew up before the advent of the private automobile, Atlanta's transportation network was shaped by the automobile, with public transit playing a very small role in the development of the region prior to the automobile. Consequently, the Atlanta region has the lowest population density of any other city of its size, *in the World*, and is not hemmed in by oceans or mountains to limit its physical expansion.

With respect to Cobb County, there are about as many people who live in Cobb but work outside of Cobb as there are people who live outside Cobb but come here to work; a typical polycentric configuration. Increasing connectivity from Cobb to Atlanta is to assume a mono-centric model which does not exist and hasn't for close to one hundred years.

- Isn't this tax really an attempt to turn a suburban county into an urban one?

Yes. That is certainly part of the driving force behind the push for this tax. But it is also wedded to the collectivist, utopian ideal that decisions related to mobility should more and more be controlled by a paternalistic government that would have us all live in compact urban density utopias where transportation would be determined and provided by government and where we would use less energy and travel shorter distances by walking and riding bicycles to where we needed to go.

The idea of waiting at a bus stop, depending on the government to determine when and where you will be picked up and dropped off, then standing in a standing room only crowded bus, is the progressive ideal of collectivist nirvana on steroids.

The alternative is anathema to this brave new world, where we live in single, detached homes, surrounded by lawns and landscaping that we design and maintain, park our cars in climate controlled garages, drive to work in air conditioned comfort, and come and go on our own schedule and not one made up by a central bureaucracy. In this day and age, this is the tale of two cities, and we must decide if we wish to live in a suburban environment that gives full range to our comfort and individuality, or acquiesce to the will and dictate of others. This is what you must decide on the first Tuesday of November, 2024. Please choose wisely.

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