

Cupid tells BOC: 'We need to lead' on transit tax

By Chart Riggall
criggall@mdjonline.com

MARIETTA — As Cobb commissioners mulled Monday how to move forward with a planned sales tax referendum for transit, Chairwoman Lisa Cupid threw down a gauntlet.

"This board needs to start feeling empowered as a board ... we need to lead," Cupid said of the proposal which would be among the defining policies of her first term as chair.

That sentiment emerged as the planned creation of a 21-member citizens advisory committee for the referendum was scrapped during Monday's work session. Commissioners agreed the body's size and lack of a clear mandate would hinder its effectiveness, if not rendering it downright unnecessary.

The citizens committee would have been drawn from 11 appointees by local government—five from each commissioner and the chair, and six from the county's cities—and another 10 from groups

including the Cobb Chamber, Kennesaw State University, and the American Council of Engineering Companies of Georgia. The discussion began stirring when commissioners questioned the selection of organizations getting a seat at the table.

"We've already been criticized that this is being driven by the chamber and special interest groups, yet they are on this committee as well," said Commissioner Keli Gambrill.

Cupid granted the inclusion of

those "special interests" raised questions of whose voices in Cobb needed to be sought out to develop project lists.

"Even though this looks like a diverse body, it almost seems as if it's the same group of people who are used to coming together to deal with certain issues," she said.

Cupid warned, however, that not bringing them in now could lose the board the political capital it will need to win the public's support for a referendum.

"If ... you don't have certain

groups at the table ahead of time," Cupid said, invoking the memory of the failed 2012 'T-SPLOST,' "then you're going to be working hard to get their buy-in, and they can actually work against your interests after the fact."

Ostensibly, the committee's purpose would have been to develop a project list, propose the amount of the sales tax, and recommend whether to place it on the ballot in either 2022 or 2024.

But questions continued to crop up: would the committee be leading the board, or vice versa? And what, pondered Deputy County Manager Jimmy Gisi, might be the fallout of the committee producing recommendations the board did not support?

"I think (the mandate) should be very, very specific if we're going to move forward with this type of organization," said Commissioner Jerica Richardson.

Gambrill and Cupid, however, grew steadily less confident in the hypothetical committee as the discussion went on.

The emergent consensus became that it was the board, and not the usual suspects of advisers, who ought to be driving the proposal.

"We need to sit down and say—okay, where are we going?" said Gambrill.

Pulling the committee from Tuesday's agenda could be the death knell for any such body, Cobb DOT Interim Director Drew Raessler told the board.

"If we're going for a '22 referendum, and if we're going to utilize this committee, we need to go," Raessler said. "Without this we will need specific, consensus vision from the board.

And I know that's very difficult, because these are big questions."

Cupid asked Raessler near the discussion's close to consider bringing the item back up in two weeks. But barring any salvation of the committee, commissioners will now be the chief body tasked with seeing the transit referendum to fruition.