

Solution in search of a problem

As reported in the MDJ, the Cobb County Board of Commissioners has hired an outside consulting firm to solicit from County residents what kind of future transit and transportation projects they might be willing to support and how they would like to pay for them. It is suggested that the projects could be paid for by an additional sales tax of as much as 2% on top of the current 6% we now pay.

In the seeking public comment, the consultants have held a series of public and town hall meetings where they lay out the options being considered. Of the 2% additional sales tax, by state law half of that can go for mass transit and can be collected for the next 30 years if approved in a public referendum that will possibly go before the voters in November of 2022. The other half can go for what is traditionally considered transportation projects such as roads, bridges and sidewalks.

Most intriguing, and concerning, is the mass transit piece of the pie. By my calculations, if levied at the full 1%, it will raise roughly \$4.5 billion over 30 years. The main options laid out by the County and its consultants are either expansion of MARTA heavy rail into the County or an extensive network of bus rapid transit (BRT) lines which would connect with MARTA and run on their own dedicated lanes. In so doing, BRTs would take valuable road surface away from all other vehicular traffic, thereby leading to more, not less, traffic congestion. Either way, local bus service would be expanded, so we could look

forward to seeing even more near empty buses lumbering along our local roads and increasing congestion with their frequent starts and stops.

Assuming the transit tax passed, it would enable the County to take the operation of our current mass transit system out of the general fund; a windfall of \$375 million over 30 years. Yet what chance would this BOC use even just a portion of those savings to go towards tax relief? The obvious answer to

that question should give every voter pause as to whether we wish to grant them such a carte blanche with our hard-earned

tax dollars.

But even more telling in this discussion as to how much we should spend on mass transit, is to ask the basic question as to what is the need which they would like to spend \$4.5 billion to address?

According to one commissioner I spoke with, the purpose of the transit portion of this new tax would be to make sure everyone in Cobb has decent transit options.

Fair enough. But in that case, we need to first determine how many people lack transportation options and can that number be verified? Then we need to know who are these people? Are they in Cobb or people who want to come to Cobb? And finally, we need to know how much are Cobb taxpayers being asked to spend for each person in need?

Looked at in this way, the BOC is offering a solution in search of a problem, and an awfully expensive solution at that. I suspect that the percentage of people lacking transportation options is a small number and can be addressed by spending a tiny fraction of what the high paid consultants, engineering and construction firms would like us to spend, because for them, the cost vs. the benefit is irrelevant. For them, the cost is the benefit. In essence, this new transit tax is not for the poor or the middle class, but rather for those wealthy individuals who wield the most influence on our elected officials.

But getting back to addressing the needs of those without decent transit options, I can think of two ways to do that. Provide each one of them a free Toyota Prius. And if they can't drive, offer them vouchers for Uber and Lyft to connect them to Cobb's transit system. This would cost a tiny fraction of what is currently being considered.

While the big spenders will scoff at these suggestions, defeating the Transit piece of this SPLOST at the ballot box will force them to determine the need honestly and forthrightly before offering a solution. To do otherwise is a sham and a farce and should be treated accordingly.

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