



Metro Indianapolis mass transit plan to face opposition from Tea party

by Chris Sikich March 19

What's proposed?

The legislation allowing a transit referendum does not propose transit projects. Those details are left to local leaders. Transit advocates have proposed doubling the size of IndyGo and adding a rail line or a Bus Rapid Transit line along a 22-mile government-owned rail line from Noblesville to Downtown. They also want Bus Rapid Transit routes — bus routes with limited stops — along Washington Street to the airport, along Meridian Street to Greenwood and Carmel, and along Keystone Avenue and 38th Street.

The 10-year transit expansion in Hamilton and Marion counties would cost \$1.3 billion, roughly \$600 million of which would be federally funded. There are no cost estimates yet to incorporate the other eight metro counties.

Operating expenses would be about \$151 million annually, funded with fares and the income tax increase.

Tea party activists are organizing the first formal opposition to expanded mass transit in Central Indiana, and they're willing to spend cash to defeat a proposed referendum on the issue.

“Our concerns are not only about the local tax increase, but about the overall cost of such a proposal,” said Chase Downham, president of the Indiana chapter of Americans for Prosperity. “We think this particular plan is costly for our city, and we are concerned about the impact on the budget going forward.”

The group opposes legislation that would allow residents to decide through a referendum whether to raise their income taxes by up to 0.3 percent to pay for most of the local portion of a 10-year, \$1.3 billion transit expansion. That tax would amount to roughly \$10 to \$15 per month for the average worker and would pay for most of the \$700 million local share.

Americans for Prosperity, a national tea party group founded by the billionaire Koch brothers, is becoming increasingly involved in state politics throughout the country. The Indiana chapter recently launched a six-figure media campaign to back Gov. Mike Pence's proposed tax cut.

Downham will meet today with Indiana lawmakers individually to discuss the group's concerns about transit.

Those meetings come just as the Indiana Senate begins to consider the legislation. The Local Government Committee will hear the bill today at 1:30 p.m. in Statehouse Room 130.

"We've gotten involved in similar issues around the country," said Downham, a former Pence aide. "Any time we have an opportunity to do what's right for taxpayers, we will do anything we can."

Transit bill author Rep. Jerr Torr, R-Carmel, said he's not concerned the opposition will derail transit at the Statehouse.

"All the General Assembly is being asked to do is give this option to local government and voters," Torr said.

If the bill passes, Torr said, both sides will have the chance to make their case to voters.

"They certainly could rally support against it for a referendum, and that's all fair and part of the process," Torr said. "As long as folks are fair in describing things and accurate . . . I think the more information they have, the better."

He and other transit advocates, including Indianapolis Mayor Greg Ballard, say improved transit would ease congested commutes, connect the workforce with jobs and enhance economic development.

If the bill passes, Hamilton and Marion counties plan to hold a referendum vote in 2014. The other eight metro-area counties could opt in over time.

Ron Gifford, executive vice president of the Central Indiana Regional Corporate Partnership, anticipates launching a major advertising campaign in support of the transit referendum that would be funded with millions of dollars raised privately.

Downham said Americans for Prosperity is prepared to tell the other side of the story to get the vote out during those referendums, arguing against higher taxes, expensive construction costs and ongoing subsidies for operations.

“I think it’s important to note that if it comes to a referendum, we are prepared to make our case to educate individuals that would be affected by this proposal,” he said.

The bill already passed the House by a 56-39 bipartisan vote, and so far has faced little resistance at the Statehouse. Passage by the Senate, though, is no guarantee.

The Local Government Committee likely will vote whether to pass the bill today to the Tax and Fiscal Policy Committee. If it passes both committees, even advocates admit nailing down the majority needed to pass the bill out of 50-member Senate could be tricky.

Senate Republicans, who hold a supermajority, are uneasy with any tax increase — even if by referendum.

Luke Kenley, a key Republican senator from Hamilton County, has removed his name as one of the bill’s five Senate sponsors. He’s not sure yet whether he will vote for or against the legislation, but he said he can’t advocate for a bill that leaves him deeply concerned about the costs.

“I’m not sure we’re really ready in Hamilton County,” he said.

Outside the Statehouse, transit opponents already are applying pressure.

Americans for Prosperity and the Carmel-based Constitutional Patriots tea party group invited Cato Institute senior fellow Randal O’Toole to a meeting in Carmel on Tuesday to discuss his concerns about transit, largely in opposition to rail.

Dwight Lile of the Constitutional Patriots calls transit expansion a boondoggle. His group opposes Carmel Mayor Jim Brainard's redevelopment projects, worked in support of U.S. Senate candidate Richard Mourdock, and is now targeting the transit plan.

"Anything that we do with taxpayer money ought to at least break even," Lile said. "This transit plan is going to benefit a very narrow amount of people, if they are benefited at all."

Tea party activists aren't the only ones with concerns.

Former Wayne Township board member Anna Peay, a Democrat, said the city needs to invest in sidewalks before it even considers transit. Lack of sidewalks is a serious public safety issue, she said, and adding bus lines will just make an already dangerous problem worse.

But advocates remain convinced that a transit expansion is the correct path for Indianapolis. Grace Baranowski, 22, Carmel, bought her first car after moving back to her hometown for a job in Indianapolis. She takes the Express Bus from Carmel to Indianapolis most days, and began volunteering to convince other young professionals of the merits of expanded transit options.

"During my summer internships," she said, "Brooklyn, Washington, D.C., and even rural India had mass transit that I could use."

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