



Residents turn out for Greenlight Pinellas debate

By Laurie Davison, Reporter
Wednesday, September 10, 2014

Pinellas County residents will vote this November on Greenlight Pinellas. The ballot question deals with raising the county's sales tax to pay for a transportation plan.

More than 100 people on both sides of the issue gathered Tuesday night for a debate at the St. Petersburg Community Church on 30th Avenue N. The Disston Heights Civic Association planned the forum.

Former St. Petersburg City Council member Jeff Danner squared off against Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow at the libertarian think tank Cato Institute.

Some said the plan would revolutionize transportation in Pinellas County through increased bus service and light rail.

"It really is a fantastic opportunity to reinvent our community," Danner said.

Others argue it's a waste of money.

"Why do they need to spend \$3 billion on a new light rail line when they can't even fill up the buses they have?" said O'Toole, who has written several articles criticizing light rail projects.

If approved, Greenlight Pinellas would mean longer operating hours for some buses and additional routes starting next year. Light rail would follow at a later time.

Supporters said it would be a much-needed boost for the area's transportation system and its economy.

"We're built out, we're losing population so this is one way we can regain some of that ground," Danner said. "Everything has to move whether it's goods, services, taking the kids to school, going out to get entertained, getting to the hospital, getting to your work. It is just everything we do."

To pay for the project, Pinellas County would increase its sales tax by 1 percent. The additional sales tax would replace a transit property tax in the county.

Opponents said it's not worth it. They said there are cheaper alternatives to ease traffic congestion.

"The most important thing is to coordinate traffic signals which isn't done around here," O'Toole said. "If you coordinated those traffic signals for a tiny fraction of the cost of a light rail line, you'd be able to save thousands of hours and thousands of gallons of fuel for people each year."

Both sides said they plan to campaign hard prior to the November vote. They said it's a vote that could come down to the wire.