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Transit Tax Gets Some Thumbs Down

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Opponents of Hillsborough County's proposed 1 cent sales tax increase for transit and road improvements see poor timing as an issue. Raising taxes in a recession is a bad idea, they said as they came together Wednesday, especially in the wake of higher state license fees and the possibility of the Bush tax cuts being allowed to expire at the end of the year.

Former Hillsborough commissioner Brian Blair was among the group voicing the arguments for voting against the proposal on the Nov. 2 ballot. While transit-oriented development might benefit a select group of developers and property owners along the rail corridor, "nobody has done a study on what this is going to do to other businesses in the county," Blair said.

The local opponents were supported by out of towners, among them [Randal O'Toole](#) of the Cato Institute and a Heritage Foundation visiting fellow.

Plans such as the one on the Nov. 2 ballot and systems in place in other parts of the country turn transit agencies into "land use czars," O'Toole said. "It's social engineering," he said, that attempts to pry people from their single family homes and into dense developments that resemble those found in communist Eastern-bloc states.

O'Toole also criticized property tax waivers and tax increment financing given to developers. A referendum on giving property tax waivers to new and expanding businesses is also on the Nov. 2 ballot.

[Wendall Cox](#), a St. Louis-based transportation consultant and visiting fellow at the Heritage Foundation, said light-rail transit "doesn't serve any place well except downtown."

Cox said pro-rail supporters fail to consider the increasing numbers of people who telecommute. "Don't think for a minute light rail will reduce traffic congestion."

Former Gainesville city commissioner Ed Braddy of the [American Dream Coalition](#) described the transit effort as "the politics of envy" because Tampa wants what Charlotte, N.C., Phoenix and other cities have, whether Tampa needs it or can afford it. Braddy painted backers of the proposal such as Tampa Mayor Pam Iorio as elitists trying to dictate lifestyle choices to suburban residents.

Local speakers such as Karen Jaroch and Sharon Calvert of the group [NoTaxForTracks](#) criticized the proposal as a redistribution of wealth to "downtown corporate interests" from more heavily populated areas of the county outside Tampa.

The pro-tax, pro-transit Moving Hillsborough Forward, the political wing of the Tampa Bay Partnership, poked holes in those arguments and criticized the out of town speakers as the "[anti-transit troubadours.](#)" MHF has touted the pro-transit views and visits of former Charlotte, N.C., mayor Patrick McCrory.

More than two dozen members of the Greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce have been riding the light rail transit system in Phoenix this week during the group's annual Benchmarking trip. The have posted a [blog and videos.](#)

The tax proposal would direct 43 percent of the revenue to light rail, 32 percent to increased bus service and 25 percent for road improvements. It would not apply to groceries or medicine and is capped on the first \$5,000 of large purchases.

Tourists will pay an estimated 15 to 20 percent. The resulting 8 percent sales tax would be the highest rate in Florida.

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