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AAA Transit Poll Veers Slightly

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Support for Hillsborough County's proposed transit tax may be slipping.

AAA Auto Club South released a poll this week showing only 47.3 percent of respondents in favor of the penny sales tax and 52.7 percent opposed. A similar poll by AAA in March found 52.5 percent in favor and 47.5 percent opposed.

The poll results come as Moving Hillsborough Forward, the coalition of business and civic groups supporting transit, launches a preemptive counter strike on opponents of the transit tax. No Tax For Tracks has scheduled a public event for 6 p.m. Sept. 22 at the Alfano Conference Center, 11606 N. McKinley Drive, Tampa, that will feature Randal O'Toole, a public policy analyst and senior fellow at the Cato Institute.

"We expected that our referendum for better countywide transportation would gain national attention from the anti-transit faction, because we've seen it before," MHF Chairman Gary Sasso said in a release. Sasso points to a [couple of studies](#) of anti-transit "myths."

Both AAA surveys could be considered a toss-up, since the poll's margin of error is plus/minus 4.9 percent. The AAA Consumer Pulse survey of 400 AAA Hillsborough members was conducted by telephone Sept. 7-10. AAA has 146,000 member households in Hillsborough.

"When advised of the spending mix for revenues derived from the penny tax — 75 percent to public transit and 25 percent to roads and bridges — more than half of survey respondents (52.9 percent) said the mix places too much emphasis on public transit (a 4.6 percent increase from the March survey)," AAA said in a release. "At the same time, 40 percent think the fund allocation is "just right" (a 4.5 percent decrease from March) and 7.1 percent think more of the tax revenue should be given to public transit (a very slight decrease from the March survey results)."

Public policy manager Karen Morgan said AAA will not take a position for or against the referendum since its members are so evenly split.

The two-poll average of 7.2 percent of the respondents said they have used a public bus in Hillsborough during the past six months. Slightly more than a third of the respondents said they have four-year college and other advanced degrees.

About a quarter of the respondents said it is "very likely" or "somewhat likely" they would use improved bus service, while nearly 40 percent said they might use light-rail. More than 70 percent said it was "somewhat unlikely" or "very unlikely" they would ride the bus while 57 percent indicated they won't be using light rail either.

The transit proposal won 56 percent of the vote in straw poll conducted by the Greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce.

I've been talking with business and political leaders the past few weeks who say they are hearing second-hand or anecdotal information that support for the referendum remains in the low 50s. But some of the comments have the tone of a boy whistling past the graveyard and insisting that he isn't afraid of ghosts.

All it takes to win is 50 percent plus one vote since the county referendum doesn't have the same over 60 percent threshold required for state constitutional amendments, such as the Amendment 4 proposal about land use regulations opposed by business.

The transit referendum comes below races for U.S. senator, U.S. representative, governor, three Cabinet offices, state senator and state representative, county commissioners, school board members, six state Constitutional amendments and a non-binding referendum on balancing the federal budget. But since Hillsborough uses paper ballots, voters can go straight to the transit referendum or any other question or race for office without having to slog through the ballot.

As always, the only poll that counts is the one on Election Day, which is Nov. 2.

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