

The Virginian-Pilot

48 other cities in America voting on transit measures and Virginia Beach's project pales in comparison

Jordan Pascale

November 5, 2016

Virginia Beach isn't alone when it votes on a transit measure at the ballot box Tuesday.

The American Public Transportation Association and Center for Transportation Excellence briefed the media on the various ballot measures earlier this week. Forty-nine other localities will weigh in on nearly \$200 billion worth of transit projects across the country – the largest number of transit ballot measures ever.

“The scope and level of potential investment in transit is unprecedented,” according to CFTE, which has tracked transit referendums since 2000. You can see all the ballot measures at cfte.org/elections.

Nearly 40 percent will vote on a sales tax increase and 34 percent on property tax increase, 10 percent are advisory referendums. The rest look at fees or bonds.

What's stark is how puny Virginia Beach's proposal is – and how little teeth the referendum has – compared to the others.

These figures would make John Atkinson blush – or make his head explode:

Los Angeles: Measure M will raise sales taxes, providing \$100 billion over 40 years to improve and expand transit service.

Seattle: The Sound Transit 3 plan would generate an additional \$54 billion from increased sales tax, property tax and motor vehicle tax for transit, including light rail.

Raleigh: A sales tax would fund a \$2.3 billion regional transit plan that would help pay for commuter rail and expand bus service.

Sacramento: Looks to raise sales tax to extend light rail to the airport with nearly a billion dollars going to transit over the next 30 years.

Charleston, S.C.: A sales tax increase would directly fund a \$600 million Bus Rapid Transit project, the city's first.

Virginia Beach's numbers: \$243 million, 3.5 miles of light rail. The referendum isn't even voting directly on a tax – it's merely advisory. And yet it may be one of the most contentious, bitter political battles in the country.

I asked officials about the tone of these campaigns across the country. Phoenix Mayor Greg Stanton said his city had a “hard fought, but respectful campaign” over light rail in his city.

“It was a donnybrook as it should be, we should have a healthy dialogue, but we were fortunate to avoid the ugliness (you described),” Stanton said in response to my question.

Jason Jordan of the CFTE agreed, saying, in most communities, the transit measures are pretty low-profile issues:

“But these (issues) can attract folks that have very strong points of view on taxes and local investment. I wouldn’t characterize these fights as nasty or personal, but spirited. It generally reflects philosophical divisions of investment versus anti-tax.”

I don’t think I need to waste any space reminding readers of our local politicking on the issue.

Stanton said that in Phoenix, the second time they voted on light rail, it had much better reception since residents saw early success:

“People don’t mind raising taxes as long as they know it won’t be wasted.”

Jordan said the number of measures have been on the rise because localities and voters realize Congress isn’t going to save the day on infrastructure needs, the local budgets are too tight to fund projects without a new tax, and because leaders have seen how successful these ballot measures have been.

Since 2000, about 71 percent of the 568 ballot initiatives have passed.

Will that streak continue with Virginia Beach?

We just have to wait two more days to find out.

More light rail forums and flying cars

Two light rail forums took place last week. One at Tidewater Community College featured a presentation from city staff, and time for the pro- and anti-light rail campaigns.

The pro side advocated for light rail as another option for people who don’t have a car, a way to attract millennials and businesses, and a way to spur economic development.

Reid Greenmun, a Beach resident who has been involved with local conservative politics and the light rail issue for years, said light rail is too costly, won’t generate economic development and no one would ride it.

He said that the city doesn’t need light rail because autonomous vehicles and even flying electric cars will eliminate light rail’s role in transportation. From a flyer: “An intelligent future is not about outdated solutions of the past.”

Another at the Meyera Oberndorf Central Library featured libertarian transportation expert Randal O’Toole from the Cato Institute. O’Toole said increased bus service is a more reasonable and economic solution for Virginia Beach.

His presentation, which covered “10 lies about light rail,” was similar to one he gave in the Beach two years ago. You can read that story at tinyurl.com/otoolelightrail.

Finishing up

- Light Rail Now/Virginia Beach Connex has spent more than \$100,000 on 350-plus pro-light rail commercials on network and cable channels, according to public disclosure files from the Federal Communications Commission. No Light Rail in Virginia Beach has said it plans to air a commercial on TV, but as of Friday afternoon, there were no filings.
- A Wall Street Journal editorial writer recently penned a takedown of The Tide with the headline: “Take a Ride on the ‘Tide-tanic’: You’re Paying for It.” Read it at tinyurl.com/tidewsj. How does a New York-based writer learn about our light rail issue? It appears her husband is in the Navy and stationed in Norfolk.
- The Chesapeake Bay Group Sierra Club and the Virginia Beach Military Economic Development Committee have endorsed light rail. A Hampton Roads Transportation Planning Organization team will study which area one-way roads would be good candidates to convert to two-way roads. In other metros, conversion has led to improvements in crashes, crime and property values. There are lots of one-way streets in the area, especially in Norfolk, Newport News, Hampton and Portsmouth.
- Transportation Secretary Aubrey Layne sat down with me for a half-hour-long Facebook Live interview Friday afternoon. We talked light rail referendums, high-occupancy toll lanes, and the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel expansion, and took questions on tolls and a lot more. Check it out at tinyurl.com/LayneFBLive.
- Glow in the dark bike trails in Norfolk’s future? Very cool.
- Two. More. Days.