

## Mass Transit

Mayors, riders endorse new plan

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By BRANDON A. PERRY |

Residents who are tired of long waits at the bus stop or heavy traffic during daily commutes could see some relief in their lifetime

That is, if enough people get on board to support a new mass transit plan created by the Central Indiana Transit Task Force.

The first phase of the \$1.3 billion plan will expand bus service options in Indianapolis and introduce light rail transportation to Marion and Hamilton counties.

Officials with the task force presented the plan during a press conference at the Indiana State Fairgrounds Tuesday. They were joined by Indianapolis Mayor Greg Ballard, as well as those from the Hamilton County cities of Carmel, Noblesville and Westfield.

"This plan can move this entire city and region forward," Ballard said. "I am confident that it will serve the transportation needs of our region and transform many of our urban neighborhoods, while representing a strong return on investment for the taxpayers."

Specifically, the transit task force plan will double bus routes provided by Indy Go and add BRT (bus rapid transit) along key corridors. BRT, often described as "light rail on wheels," has been used in cities such as Boston, Cleveland and Seattle to provide faster, more efficient service than an ordinary bus line.

BRT utilizes lanes dedicated to buses, as well as traffic signal prioritization, real-time schedule updates and permanent stations for passengers. Supporters say using BRT can lead to a reduction in average wait times, offer more direct routes and provide longer service hours.

The task force plan will also upgrade bus routes going from east to west along Washington Street (which includes downtown and downtown to 38th Street from Lawrence to Lafayette Square Mall and along Keystone Avenue from the University of Indianapolis to Carmel.

In addition, existing rail lines will be converted into a commuter system from downtown to Noblesville.

"We believe that now is the time for local leaders to support this plan, because our region is behind other metropolitan areas when it comes to mass transit," said Ron Gifford, executive director of the task force. "In order for us to be competitive in terms of attracting business and economic development, it is important to have a transit system that is more responsive to the needs of people getting to and from work."

The task force plan, estimated to cost \$1.3 billion and completed by 2021, would be funded with federal funding and a slight increase in local income tax (from 1.62 percent to 1.92 percent in Marion County, and from 1 percent to 1.3 percent in Hamilton County).

A taxpayer earning \$50,000 a year, for example, would pay about \$12.25 per month more in taxes, or \$147 more a year.

What's next

A referendum will need to be held in November for voters in the two counties to approve a tax increase to fund the proposal.

The Indiana Legislature must approve having the proposal placed on the ballot. That might be a tough sell for Republicans in the Legislature who currently hold the majority and are usually firmly opposed to any tax increases.

Sen. Mike Delph, a Carmel Republican whose Senate District is in both Marion and Hamilton counties, has already announced his support for the plan, despite support from his mayor and fellow Republican, Jim Brainard.

"If the so-called leaders in the business community believe so strongly in this proposal, let them lead by example by raising private revenue," Delph said. "They can start by looking inward to their own revenue. It is easy to ask others to pay for your expenses."

However, task force members and supporters, including those representing the African-American community, say voters should be given the chance to decide whether they want to invest in mass transit.

John Thompson, chairman of Indiana Black Expo, said the community should get behind the plan because it will benefit the entire state.

"This boost in economic activity can turn around neighborhoods, broaden our tax base and create jobs," said Thompson a task force member. "Residential and commercial development has sprung up in regions that have implemented mass transit systems."

Joe Slash, president of the Indianapolis Urban League, said better public transportation could be helpful to unemployed residents looking for work.

"Many times we have been successful in finding job opportunities for clients, but they couldn't get to the job because there wasn't transportation options for them," Slash said.

Many local bus riders are hoping the Task Force plan will come to fruition.

"I'm definitely looking forward to the convenience," said Robin, a woman who wouldn't give her last name, as she stood at a bus stop on 16th and Keystone. "At one corner I remember waiting over a half an hour for a bus that never came. I had to walk home from work in the rain. It would be nice to not have to do that again."

Charles Starks, who is from Indianapolis but briefly lived in Denver, said he enjoyed using that city's transportation system.

"I wish they could get light rail to places besides the suburbs, but at least with the improved bus services we'll be right in line with other cities," he said.

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