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# Transit plan eyes a smooth ride

## Praise follows announcement of proposal, though some worry about taxes, low usage

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Greg Wilson (left), director of Minority/Women Business Development for the city of Indianapolis, met with Remo Mezzetta of Mezzetta Construction Services after Tuesday's announcement of a \$1.3 billion overhaul of the transit system in Marion and Hamilton counties. / Kelly Wilkinson / The Star

Written by **Chris Sikich**

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Harold Murry never can be sure the bus will be on time when he walks 10 blocks from his home to the nearest stop.

He's one of the many people in Marion County with no car, handcuffed by limited routes, hours and days of operation of perpetually underfunded IndyGo.

"It's terrible," he said. "And I'm not joking."

The Central Indiana Transit Task Force's 10-year, \$1.3 billion transit overhaul has drawn both praise and concerns. Unveiled Tuesday, the plan to double the size of IndyGo and add train service from Noblesville to Downtown Indianapolis drew applause from a who's who of neighborhood leaders, nonprofit managers and local politicians packing the Grand Hall at the State Fairgrounds.

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The income tax rate for Marion and Hamilton counties would go up three-tenths of 1 percent to cover the local share of a \$1.3 billion transit plan. About half of the plan would be federally funded.

\$75

The annual transit income tax paid by a worker making \$25,000 annually.

\$150

Amount paid by a worker making \$50,000 annually.

\$225

Amount paid by a worker making \$75,000 annually.

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But the response outside the room was mixed. While transit supporters point toward easier commutes and new economic development opportunities, detractors are worried about paying more taxes for a system they say too few will ride.

Mike Clemmons, 42, Westfield, shares the concerns of many. He says not enough people would use the service, and he thinks transit should be self-sufficient.

"I don't think they've showed that people would use it," he said.

Commuters such as Thomas Locke, 29, Carmel, say the expansion can't happen soon enough. He drives through rush-hour traffic every day to his job Downtown, and he'd much rather ride the bus system proposed in Tuesday's plan.

"I was hoping this plan would go heavy on bus rapid transit, and that's what it looks like," he said.

In January, the task force will ask lawmakers to approve legislation for an income tax increase and a governing system. It also wants Marion and Hamilton county voters – like Murry, Clemmons and Locke -- to have the final say through referendums in November. More

counties could opt into the plan in the future.

Murry, 56, would vote for the plan, saying more reliable service would ensure he's no longer left standing out in the cold at his bus stop near 42nd Street and Post Road.

He's not thrilled with raising taxes, but he's ready for better, more reliable service. "I am willing to pay for it," he said.

About 50 percent of the plan would be federally funded, but the local share is centered on an income tax increase of three-tenths of 1 percent -- equal to about \$5.75 per paycheck for someone making \$50,000.

At the fairgrounds, Indianapolis Mayor Greg Ballard and Carmel Mayor Jim Brainard were among several leaders who made impassioned pleas on behalf of the plan.

"I thought it was a great public launch of the final plan," said task force Executive Director Ron Gifford. "It was a great crowd with a lot of enthusiasm and excitement from folks all over the community."

Brainard said Indianapolis and Central Indiana need transit to stay competitive with cities across the nation, especially warm-weather

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cities. And transit, he said, would open new opportunities for people to gain access to health care, education and jobs.

"The promise of America has always been about creating a better life for the people who live here," Brainard said. "And that's being expressed today in this proposal that would create a better way of life for all sorts of people."

Indianapolis Urban League President Joseph Slash said public transit would help his organization connect people with jobs. Too often, he said, lack of transportation proves an insurmountable barrier for people who otherwise could find employment.

"If we don't make this investment," he said, "then I'm afraid we're going to continue to see parts of our community deteriorate and continue to fragment and force more people to move outside the community where they can be closer to jobs. On the other hand, if we [invest](#) in a comprehensive mass transit system that makes the neighborhood a community where job and economic development opportunities (exist), everybody wins."

City-County Councilwoman Maggie Lewis wasn't able to attend Tuesday's meeting, but her voice could be crucial to [winning](#) support among the public and fellow Democrats. She's been pegged as the council president when Democrats regain the majority in 2012.

Eager to receive a briefing on the plan later this week, she's optimistic a transit proposal focused on bus service could [win](#) voters' approval – if the right legwork is done. She said the successful 2009 referendum that authorized taxpayer-backed bonds for a new Wishard Memorial Hospital -- approved by 83 percent of voters -- could be a model.

"It's important that we truly vet the issue and that we allow the community to be briefed and we have the town hall meetings," Lewis said. "Wishard has set the bar really high as far as how to do a referendum and get community buy-in. If they follow that plan, I think we'll get this approved."

**Follow Star reporter Chris Sikich at [twitter.com/ChrisSikich](https://twitter.com/ChrisSikich). Call him at (317) 444-6036.**

**Star reporter Jon Murray contributed to this story.**

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