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Erika D. Smith: This version of transit plan is just right

Hoosiers have proposed, debated and ultimately scuttled plans to expand mass transit in Central Indiana for about as long as I've been alive.

One plan was too big. Another too small. And every plan was too expensive. It's like a sad, politically tinged rendition of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears."

It's time for that to end.

The plan to be unveiled today by [business](#) leaders and a cadre of elected officials is *juuuuust* right.

It's not too big.

Many of the complaints about the earlier version of the Indy Connect plan had to do with its scope. Taxpayers in nine counties would have had to chip in for [buses](#) and rail lines, even though taxpayers in Marion and Hamilton counties clearly had the most to gain.

Now, the plan calls only for residents of Hamilton and Marion counties to pay -- and what's more, they'd pay in proportion to what those counties would gain. Marion County would get about 75 percent of the transit infrastructure, and its taxpayers would provide about 75 percent of the

funding. Hamilton County would get about 25 percent of the infrastructure and put about 25 percent into the pot.

The plan isn't too small.

With a rollout that would double the amount of bus service in Marion County, add buses in Hamilton County and build a rail line that would get suburbanites to Downtown Indianapolis faster than driving, the plan is still robust enough to [makeadifference](#).

And the plan isn't too expensive.

Sure, \$1.3 billion over 10 years sounds like a lot. But think about this: Based on the average household income for a family of four in Marion County, this plan would cost about \$10 a month. Many people spend more than that at Starbucks -- or some local coffee [shop](#) -- in a week.

So, I'm cautiously optimistic.

A region teeming with transit might be the fairy-tale ending for rail and bus

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evangelists like me, but getting there will be like making sausage. Lobbyists with the Greater Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce and the Central Indiana Corporate Partnership will have to work hard to get state lawmakers on their side. More than one transit plan has fallen apart in the hands of members of the Indiana General Assembly.

The hang-up with lawmakers isn't so much about the merits of transit. It's about being perceived as politicians who raise taxes -- a no-no in this state.

Yet the leaders of both houses are at least talking about a referendum.

The trick will be to convince lawmakers that voting to authorize a referendum so voters can decide whether to raise taxes is not the same as voting to raise taxes. Although that is true, the truth and politics don't always mix.

Add to that a host of other potential distractions: the short session, the days that lawmakers will take off for the Super Bowl, another possible stalemate over "right to work" legislation.

Assuming all of this goes as planned at the Statehouse, voters still have to be convinced. My sense is that will be easier than winning over lawmakers.

Why? Because residents finally are talking about transit, and they will *keep* talking about it.

It was a major issue in the last mayoral

race. More people are willing to ride buses -- even the woefully underfunded IndyGo system. And more people are willing to try other forms of transportation than a **car**, as evidenced by the recent uptick of people riding bikes to work and for fun.

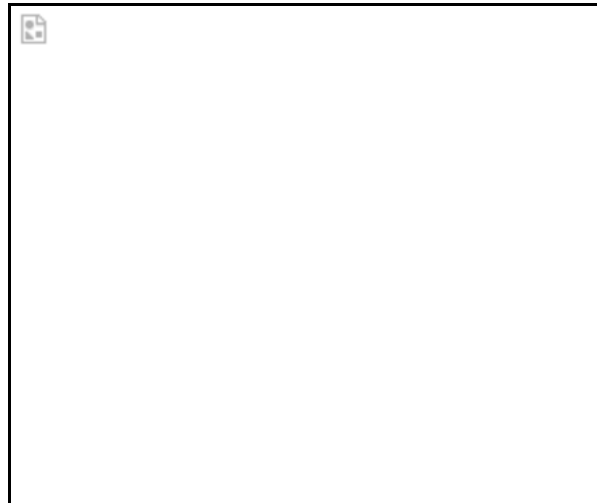
Transit is an issue that isn't going away, and this is a good plan. It's time to make it happen.

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