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Mass transit plan to include central Ind. service

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INDIANAPOLIS — Mass transit supporters unveiled a 10-year plan Tuesday that would add light-rail trains from downtown Indianapolis to suburban Noblesville and expand bus line service as part of a \$1.3 billion proposal that would be funded by an increase in local income-tax rates.

Indianapolis Mayor Greg Ballard and Carmel Mayor Jim Brainard were among the group that announced the Central

Indiana Transit Task Force's plan at the Indiana State Fairgrounds, following nearly three years of study.

Although such a transit system has been discussed for decades, Brainard said the growing problem of urban sprawl and its costs in the form of increased government services make it time to move ahead now to expand commuters' options in the area.

"We have this big sprawl in the region ... we're very disconnected. This system will help pull us together as a region," he said.

The Indianapolis Business Journal reports that under the plan voters in Marion and Hamilton counties would be asked to approve an 0.3 percentage point increase in their local income-tax rates to help pay for the plan's elements, which would be built over the next decade.

Supporters of the proposal to add light-rail service between Indianapolis and Noblesville and expand bus service must get state lawmakers' approval in the upcoming session for a ballot referendum next November asking voters in the two counties to approve the funding mechanism.

The message to legislators will be "allow the people to have a vote," said Mark Miles, head of the Central Indiana Corporate Partnership, which has led the transit task force efforts.

Legislative leaders' previous reluctance to pay for Indianapolis-area transit funding via a state sales-tax increase spurred the transit group's proposal to tap local income taxes in the two counties instead.

If the transit plan moves ahead, it would be a boon for commuters who now face long traffic backups along Interstate 69 during their drive to and from Indianapolis, said Tim Maloney, senior policy director with the Hoosier Environmental Council.

He said many people who now drive to work would opt instead to take a train to downtown Indianapolis and back or use one of the expanded bus lines. That, in turn, would improve local air quality by reducing pollution from auto exhaust, Maloney said.

"This plan will provide for a higher quality of life throughout the metropolitan area and that's something we think would be very positive for the community and the environment," he said.

The plan's funding mechanism would boost Marion County's local-option income tax to 1.92 percent from 1.62 percent, while Hamilton County's income-tax rate would rise to 1.3 percent from 1 percent.

Under the proposal, a single taxpayer in either county earning \$50,000 a year would pay about \$12.25 more a month — or about \$147 a year — to support the mass transit proposal.

The plan would include doubling the amount of bus service in Marion County, which currently is served by IndyGo, and launching an express bus service between Marion County and Hamilton County by 2014.

The proposed light rail line would run 22 miles between downtown Indianapolis' Union Station and Noblesville atop the Nickel Plate rail corridor and begin service by 2021. At \$625 million, the rail line is the most expensive element in the \$1.3 billion plan.

Both Ballard and Brainard framed the transit system as a key tool for economic development and for keeping the region competitive with other large metro areas that already offer transit amenities.

Joe Slash, president and CEO of the Indianapolis Urban League, said there have been many times where his

organization has found job opportunities for clients who couldn't get to the job because of a lack of public transportation connections.

Slash said the region risks increased fragmentation and stagnation without better transportation options.

Beyond better access to jobs, the system could provide connections to educational opportunities, better access to health care and a lifeline to senior citizens who can no longer drive, Brainard said.

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