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Mass transit plan for Indy metro area gets a fresh push

Business leaders today will unveil an updated 10-year, \$1.3 billion transit overhaul that would double IndyGo and add train service from Noblesville to Downtown Indianapolis.

The plan is the latest in a decades-long push for mass transit. But the difference this time could be in the details, something opponents say previous plans have lacked.

The Central Indiana Transit Task Force has proposed a plan with roughly 50 percent federal funding and a local portion centered on an income tax increase of three-tenths of 1 percent.

The local funding is a change from a sales tax in the group's initial plan last year. And rather than proposing service for the eight-county area, the plan has been scaled back to Marion and Hamilton counties, the two areas advocates say have the most infrastructure in place and willingness to move forward.

But the task force will need to win over state legislators.

• **Transit Team Video:** [Bus Rapid Transit](#). In January, the group will ask lawmakers to approve legislation for funding, and a transit governance structure. It also wants

voters in each county to have the final say through referendums in November.

Mark Miles, who co-founded the task force, said his group is more prepared than two years ago to navigate the challenges at the Statehouse. In 2010, Republicans quickly squelched any hope for a sales tax increase and ultimately refused to consider transit legislation.

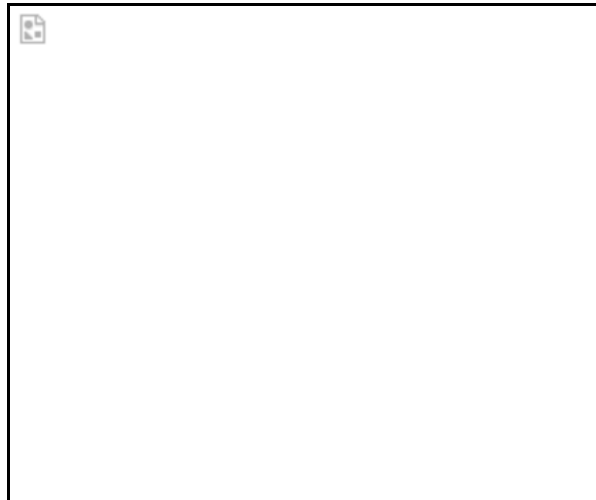
"I'm guardedly optimistic," Miles said. "I think we have folks in the legislature who recognize this has been an issue in the community for a long time. And they are willing to listen."

The nitty-gritty

The task force will debut its plan at a news conference at 10 a.m. today at the State Fairgrounds. And -- unlike in the past -- it's packing a punch with local support.

Indianapolis Mayor Greg Ballard already has met privately with lawmakers to inform

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them that transit will be his top priority at the Statehouse. He will be joined today by a cast of influential local government leaders, including the mayors of Carmel, Noblesville and Westfield and Fishers' Town Council president.

The leaders are selling transit first as an economic [development tool](#) and second as a way to ease commutes and to create more urban mobility.

"If we are to succeed and be competitive as a city in the future," Ballard said, "Indianapolis must have the amenities that attract creative, vibrant, entrepreneurial business talent. A robust mass transit system is one of those amenities that future business leaders and workers seek when deciding where to live."

The task force's plan likely will evolve as lawmakers work through the legislation. But as proposed, it would spend \$667.8 million to expand bus service in Marion and Hamilton counties, plus \$110.4 million annually in operating expenses. The fleet would be operated by a new multicounty transit authority instead of IndyGo and would be expanded from 122 to 232 [vehicles](#).

Bus rapid transit routes -- which would have stops about a half-mile apart -- would go to the airport, Carmel and Greenwood and run along 38th Street. Express bus routes -- which have limited stops -- would head to the airport, Castleton, Carmel, Pike Township and Lawrence.

Rail would be last on board. The service from Noblesville to Downtown would cost \$625.4 million, plus \$16.8 million in annual operating expenses. It would come online in 2021 along the 22-mile government-owned Nickel Plate line.

The plan is much less ambitious than the task force's first effort -- a mammoth 25-year, \$10.7 billion transportation proposal that included \$2.4 billion for mass transit in eight counties. The remainder mostly covered road work.

Ron Gifford, the task force's executive director, said the revised plan has a time frame and scope that people could understand.

"We have strong bipartisan support in both Hamilton County and in Marion County," Gifford said. "Over the last decade, there has been an incredible amount of planning and thought and consideration as to the design of a system in those two counties. The same kind of formal planning has not occurred in the other counties."

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But more counties could opt in at any point. The task force still envisions future rail service to Greenwood, Franklin and Zionsville, and bus service to Plainfield, Avon, Brownsburg and Greenfield.

Bumps in the road?

Despite the task force's optimism, the hurdles still are high.

The economy continues to struggle. Anti-tax sentiments remain strong. Right-to-work legislation could once again dominate the General Assembly. And Republicans -- who have long been wary of transit -- control both the House and Senate.

Still, the frost toward transit at the Statehouse could be thawing. Two linchpin lawmakers are considering authoring funding plans despite doubts about whether transit will succeed.

Rep. Jeff Espich, R-Uniondale, and Sen. Luke Kenley, R-Noblesville, say their willingness to work with transit advocates is more an attempt at controlling the direction of the legislation than a show of support.

"You have got to consider the cost," Kenley said. "That's a pretty enormous perpetual burden on the taxpayers of Central Indiana."

Espich said: "I don't think communities in Indiana are really laid out for successful mass transit. We don't have millions of people who live around bus lines, and whose factories and businesses are along bus lines."

Regardless, the two powerful lawmakers -- Espich is chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, and Kenley is chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee -- say a strong showing of local support carries weight.

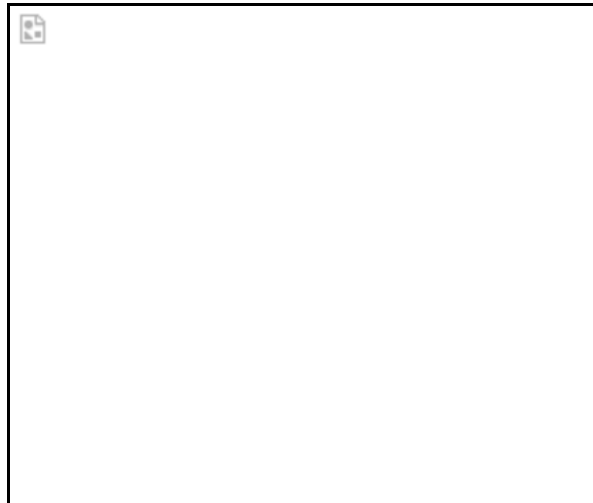
The task force suggests re-configuring income tax options already available to local governments into a transit tax. But Espich prefers to simply adopt a new transit income tax, saying that's clearer-cut to taxpayers.

The bottom line would be the same: a tax increase.

And Kenley and Espich both are skeptical of a referendum to adopt the tax, saying mayors and councils are elected to make those decisions. But the lawmakers are open to either an advisory referendum or one that triggers the ability of a transit authority to raise taxes.

"Our government has always functioned on taxing by elected officials," Espich said.

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This issue could be trickier to resolve. The task force wants a referendum that gives taxpayers a clear voice -- though Gifford said he's not drawing any lines in the sand.

"We seem to be coming toward consensus or agreement on the concept of using a particular tax -- an income tax -- and now we're really working through the details of specifically what that looks like," Gifford said. "The fact that we're on a path of working out the details is very encouraging."

Follow Star reporter Chris Sikich at twitter.com/ChrisSikich. Call him at (317) 444-6036.



Zoom

This picture is from Cleveland, but offers an example of what buses may look like here in Indianapolis. / - Provided by Central Indiana Transit Task Force

BUS RAPID TRANSIT

Bus rapid transit routes along Washington Street to the airport, along 38th Street, along College and Keystone avenues north to Carmel, and along Madison Avenue south to Greenwood.

Buses, similar to the one above, would stop at key intersections every few blocks -- with more stops than the express bus service now running from Carmel and Fishers but fewer than traditional IndyGo routes. The buses could share traffic with existing lanes, but it's also possible that new lanes, dedicated for buses, could be built in some areas. Technology would change the traffic lights to green to keep buses on schedule.

MORE BUSES

Doubling the bus service in Marion County and later adding service to Hamilton County.

EXPRESS BUSES

Express bus routes from Downtown to the airport, to Castleton, to Carmel, to Traders Point in Pike Township, and to Lawrence. Like the service now running in Carmel and Fishers, express buses' routes are designed with limited stops to speed commutes.

COMMUTER RAIL LINE

The 22-mile government-owned Nickel Plate rail line would be converted into commuter train service, heading from Union Station, through Castleton and Fishers to just south of downtown Noblesville. There would be multiple stops in Marion and Hamilton counties, but one complete trip would take 30 minutes -- far faster than a similar commute by car.

BUS CIRCULATOR ROUTES

Circulator routes would be added near transit stops in Lawrence, Fishers, Noblesville, Carmel and Downtown. These shuttle-type buses would ferry people in fixed routes from their transit stop to major workplaces and local attractions.

Source: Central Indiana Transit Task Force

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