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Business leaders to announce 10-year, \$1.3B mass transit overhaul

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 that opponents say previous plans have lacked.

The Central Indiana Transit Task Force has proposed funding centered on an income tax of three-tenths of one percent and federal money. That's a change from a sales tax backing up the local portion 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.

In January, the group will ask lawmakers to approve legislation for funding, and a transit governance structure. They want

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 during the last session.

"I'm guardedly optimistic," he 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."

Show of support from local leaders

The task force will debut its plan at a press conference at 10 a.m. today at the State Fairgrounds. And — unlike the past — they're packing a punch with local support.

Indianapolis Mayor Greg Ballard already

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has met privately with lawmakers to inform 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, 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 multi-county 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, 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 roadwork.

Ron Gifford, the task force's executive director, said the revised plan has a timeframe 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.

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The same kind of formal planning has not occurred in the other counties.”

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

Frost toward transit is thawing

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 Luke Kenley, R-Noblesville, say their willingness to work with transit advocates is more an attempt toward 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.”

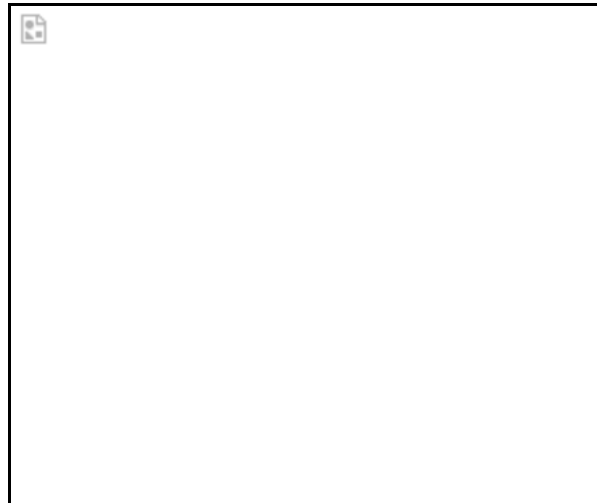
Regardless, the two powerful lawmakers — Espich chairs the House Ways and Means Committee and Kenley chairs the Senate Appropriations Committee — say a strong showing of local support carries weight.

The details emerging as obstacles don’t appear insurmountable. 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

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one that triggers the ability of a transit authority to raise taxes.

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

“We don’t do referendums in any other area, with the light exception of schools, and that’s seen more as limiting schools — as a constraint.”

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.”

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