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Approve sales-tax ballot question

OUR OPINION: MASS TRANSIT CAN HELP EASE BROWARD GRIDLOCK

Broward County can't pave its way out of growing traffic congestion. Even if it were practical, there isn't enough land to build more roads to accommodate the increasing number of cars as Broward's eastern cities approve more high-density projects and the county itself nears build-out. What can help would be to create a mass-transit network efficient enough to attract high ridership.

The proposed one-cent increase in the sales tax that would raise \$260 million annually is the best way to pay for that network. The County Commission should approve a proposal that would put the tax on the November 2006 ballot.

A workable plan

Then comes the hard part. In order to persuade voters, the county -- and its cities -- first should listen to residents' views on what sort of mass transit they need and would actually use, and then draw up a blueprint based on that input. This should be a genuinely workable plan, not a list of turkeys to please every constituency.

Next must come a transportation plan structured to guarantee transparency in spending the dollars. It must detail what projects will be built or expanded; provide a timetable for projects' completion; and ensure that all the money will be spent on what voters approved.

A consultant's plan proposes spending \$190 million to triple the bus fleet to 700-plus vehicles. A light-rail transit corridor along U.S. 441 would cost \$1 billion, an I-595 rail line \$908 million. Will residents use these enough to justify construction? The county should only build what people will want to ride. One sensible proposal in the plan would fund a rapid-transit bus line along Oakland Park Boulevard, a perennially congested east-west route.

The County Commission last week discussed whether to create an oversight board to monitor tax spending. Tread carefully, commissioners. If you're going to promise such oversight, learn from Miami-Dade County's mistitled Citizens Independent Transportation Trust that "oversees" transit-tax spending.

Federal transit dollars

The CITT is more advisory than authoritative. It has no staff, so it must rely on the county-transit agency's information rather than its own experts' independent analyses. Though Miami-Dade's transit-tax campaign implied that the CITT would be an independent watchdog, the referendum's ballot language left wiggle room, which the Miami-Dade Commission used to retain power over tax spending. Broward must avoid such deception.

Once the blueprint and governance are worked out, the next task would be to show skeptical voters why Broward can't afford *not* to create a dedicated transit funding source. It's the best way for the county to compete for millions of federal transit dollars. Without the money to create more transit options, Broward drivers would face a gridlocked future.