

ATLANTA, GEORGIA

Transportation Funding Initiative

Date of Election: July 31, 2012

Title: Special District Transportation Sales and Use Tax (T-SPLOST)—Referendum for Transportation Sales Tax (Statewide Structure)

The 2010 Transportation Investment Act (House Bill 277) established the context for this special transportation referendum. The legislation granted 12 regions the ability to pass a 1 cent sales tax to fund transportation projects over a ten-year period.

Overview

- Georgia is one of only a few states that allow local governments to levy an additional sales tax on the sale of motor fuel.
- The average driving times in Atlanta are 11th longest in the United States.¹
- Georgia ranks 48th in per capita in spending on transportation.²
- The Atlanta metro area ranks 7th for population growth in metropolitan areas of the nation.³

Metro-Atlanta Region Efforts: Summary of Referendum

This analysis will consider the financial impact of the Metro Atlanta region; however, there was an additional \$13 billion in potential projects in the other 11 regions as well. This referendum included a \$7.2 billion transportation package that proposed a 1percent sales tax over a ten-year period to fund roads and mass transportation. 85 percent of the funds would be allocated for a regional list of proposed projects, and 15% of the funds would be given to the cities and counties to spend on their own transportation needs.⁴ 48 percent of the proposed transportation funding was allocated for roads and the rest was designated for buses, trains, trails and bicycle proposals.

There were ten counties in the Atlanta region that voted on this referendum. These counties include: Cherokee, Clayton, Cobb, DeKalb, Douglas, Fayette, Fulton, Gwinnett, Henry, and Rockdale.

Status of Legislation: This referendum failed in each of the ten counties in the Atlanta region, though it did pass within the limits of the City of Atlanta.

37%	Yes
63%	No

¹ Texas Transportation Institute at Texas A&M University

² Atlanta Regional Commission

³ Census, 2011

⁴ Hart, Atlanta Journal Constitution

Overview of Pro-Referendum Campaign

Goal of Pro-Referendum Campaign: The goal of this sales tax referendum campaign in Atlanta was to pass the \$7.2 billion over ten years for transportation projects in the Metro Atlanta area.

Main Reasons for Pro-Referendum Campaign Loss

1. Region was divided with respect to how to solve the transportation problem.
2. Georgia has an unusually high number of tea party activists, who achieved their “political high water mark” during the referendum campaign.
3. Economic Downturn/Recession
4. Anti-Tax Sentiment
5. General Distrust of Government

Structure of Pro-Referendum Campaign

1. **Citizens for Transportation Mobility:** This organization ran the political campaign and had a budget of \$6.5 million.
2. **The Metro Atlanta Voter Education Network (MAVEN):** MAVEN was a tax-deductible entity established to coordinate an educational campaign, and MAVEN eventually raised \$2 million. There were numerous third party groups that spent in-kind contributions well in excess of \$1 million.

Opposition to Referendum: The main opposition organization against the referendum was the Transportation Leadership Coalition. However, there were other groups that formally opposed this referendum. For example, there was opposition from the Sierra Club, NAACP, Tea Party groups, and others as well.

Campaign Management & Structure for Pro-Referendum Campaign

- **Advocacy Campaign:** The Fair Share for Transit Campaign was led by the Livable Communities Coalition of Metro Atlanta.
- **Educational Campaigns:** There were two different educational campaigns on the pro-referendum side. “Fast Track Forward” was a transit educational campaign, and it was operated by the Livable Communities Coalition. A second, more general educational campaign, “Transform Metro Atlanta,” was run by the Metro Atlanta Voter Education Network (MAVEN).
- **Political Campaign:** The “Untie Atlanta Vote Yes on July 31” campaign was organized by the Citizens for Transportation Mobility.

Pro-Referendum Proponents

- Metro Atlanta Transportation Education Network, Inc. (MAVEN)
- Metro Atlanta Chamber
- Citizens for Transportation Mobility (CTM)
- Citizens for Progressive Transit
- Democratic Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed
- Republican Georgia Governor Nathan Deal
- Atlanta-Based Companies:
 - Coca-Cola Company
 - Delta Air Lines, Inc.
 - United Parcel Service
 - Home Depot
 - Georgia Power, an Atlanta-based subsidiary of Southern Co. Georgia Power
 - Ted Turner, CNN founder
 - Weather Channel
 - Cook's Warehouse (Local kitchen shop)
 - The Atlanta Braves

Opposition to Referendum

- **Tea Party Groups:** These groups argued that the tax was not constitutional and was wasteful spending.⁵
- **Tax Watchdogs**
- **NAACP:** This organization opposed the referendum on the grounds that the not enough of the proposed transportation projects would benefit the “poor, largely black parts of the region.”⁶
- **Environmental Opposition: Georgia Sierra Club**

The Georgia Sierra Club argued that the referendum’s project proposals focused too heavily on roads and did not include sufficient mass transit projects.⁷ The Georgia Sierra Club also argued that the projects included in the referendum would not help to improve Atlanta’s traffic congestion.⁸

- **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.**

⁵ McWhirter, The Wall Street Journal

⁶ Severson, The New York Times

⁷ Newkirk, Bloomberg Businessweek.

⁸ McWhirter, The Wall Street Journal

Pro-Referendum Campaign Organization & Political Consultants

The Metro Atlanta Transportation Education Network (MAVEN) and the **Citizens for Transportation Mobility, Inc. (CTM)** hired a team to support their campaign to support this transportation referendum.

- **McRae Communications:** **Bert Brantley**, from McRae Communications, was the communications director of the campaign.⁹
- **Saba Long:** She was the press secretary for MAVEN and Untie Atlanta.¹⁰

Strategists¹¹:

- Glenn Totten, Democratic strategist
- Paul Bennecke, Republican Campaign Strategist
- Kevin Ross, Georgia Strategist
- Che Watkins, Campaign Manager for MAVEN and CTM (Former Vice President of External Affairs at the Metro Atlanta Chamber)
- Bert Brantley, of McRae Communications, served as communications director, along with Saba Long, who is now with Saporta Report.
- Candice Franklin: Fundraising
- Kristin Oblander: Fundraising
- Rebecca Cummiskey: Fundraising
- Hill Research: Campaign hired this company to conduct polls and research
- Dr. David Hill: Leading pollster from Hill Research

Campaign Strategies & Tactics

Pro-Referendum Campaign

Broad Campaign Objective: To attract unlikely primary voters and bring them to the polls.¹²

The campaign framed the debate around traffic congestion, which was one of several competing dimensions of this transportation debate.¹³ This campaign focused largely on the positive economic benefits of the sales tax as well as the fact that the transportation projects would create jobs in Atlanta.

Although the campaign strategists know that Democratic voters are conventionally less “tax-shy”, they still acknowledge that Democratic voters do not love taxes. In addition, the economy has had an impact on their financial situations. Campaign officials also acknowledged that undecided voters tend to vote against proposals. The pro-referendum campaign aimed to secure support from 60% of Democrats, 35% of Republican men and 50% of Republican women.

⁹ Website: <http://www.mcrae.com/>

¹⁰ Website: <http://saportareport.com/about/>

¹¹ Source: <http://newsmanager.atlantaregional.com/anmviewer.asp?a=39331&z=21>

¹² Hart, 6/4/12, Atlanta Journal-Constitution

¹³ TRB 2013 Annual Meeting

The various businesses and organizations that supported this referendum highlighted the fact that Atlanta's transportation problems were having a negative impact on businesses. Moreover, the supporters contended that the referendum's proposed transportation projects would create jobs.

Campaign Spending: The pro-referendum campaign outspent the opposition significantly by spending over \$8 million.

Anti-Referendum Campaign Message

The groups that campaigned against the referendum told voters that the proposed projects outlined in the referendum would not help to solve Atlanta's transportation challenges.¹⁴

Political Messaging & Campaign Advertising Materials

Pro-Referendum Campaign

Overall, these campaigns used traditional media and social media to reach potential voters. They also spent money on TV commercials, radio and print advertising, and earned media. In addition, the campaign organized mailing distributions and paid for robocalls.

- Fair Share for Transit Campaign. This campaign used earned media, direct emails, phone calls, and hosted meetings with Roundtable members.
- LCC's Fast Track Forward. This educational campaign specifically targeted urban dwellers. They also aimed to educate "under voters", which are voters who typically do not vote in primaries or off-year elections.
- Untie Atlanta Political Campaign. This campaign used TV ads to emphasize the individual benefits of decreasing traffic congestion in Atlanta. The campaign also posted a series of "Untie Atlanta" billboards, which were posted on congested interstates.¹⁵

Citizens for Transportation Mobility:

<http://www.gspe.org/Legislative%20News/Intro%20for%20Voter%20ID%20Calls%20Apr%20'12.pdf>

Anti-Referendum Campaign: Transportation Leadership Coalition.

This campaign raised approximately \$14,000.¹⁶ The other external organized opposition groups (NAACP, Sierra Club, and the Tea Party) spent approximately \$30,000, and they facilitated a more traditional grass roots-type of campaign.

¹⁴ McWhirter, The Wall Street Journal

¹⁵ Severson, The New York Times

¹⁶ <http://traffict ruth.net/>

Why Did the Pro-Referendum Campaign Fail?

Pro-Referendum Internal Campaign Problems

The campaign was criticized for its top-down structure, and personnel became a main challenge when the campaign's biggest hire, Glenn Trotten, left only a few months after the campaign started. Liz Flowers, the communications director for the campaign, also left unexpectedly.¹⁷

Another major hurdle that the campaign faced was that it lost potential endorsements from core segments of the voter base; for example, the NAACP and Sierra Club both formally opposed the tax on the grounds that the proposed projects should have included more mass transit despite the fact that both organizations were heavily involved and supportive of passing the TIA legislation at the legislature.

The campaign's spending also emerged as a problem: The campaign spent over \$8 million, yet still ultimately lost. This has implications for future campaigns. Finally, the campaign overestimated its ability to win over Republican voters. Even though Georgia's Republican governor supported the tax, he did not begin to actively endorse it until the day before the election in a press conference.¹⁸

Polling Data & Analysis

Polling data predicted that this referendum would not pass, and polling analysis also revealed that there were underlying issues that this referendum brought to light. For example, an Atlanta Journal-Constitution poll in 2011 found that 42% of respondents thought that new mass transit would attract more crime.¹⁹ Independent pollsters predicted an "overwhelming loss" and the main reasons they identified were voters' general distrust of government and that there was a split among urban versus rural voters.

1. Rosetta Stone Poll (May 22, 2012)

42%	Yes
45%	No
13%	Undecided

- 35% of Republicans opposed this tax, and 35% of Democrats supported this tax.
- African-American voters supported this transportation tax by 30%.
- 20% of white voters opposed the tax.
- Two of ten counties supported the tax—DeKalb County and Fulton County. 52% supported the tax, and 33% opposed it. 53.9% of the other eight counties opposed the transportation measure.

¹⁷ Hart, August 1, 2012

¹⁸ Hart, August 1, 2012

¹⁹ Hart, August 1, 2012

	Total	DeKalb/Fulton	Other Counties	Black	White	Republican	Democrat
Support TSPLOST	41.5%	52%	33.4%	55.1%	33.4%	27.8%	58.6
Oppose TSPLOST	45%	33.3%	53.9%	27.2%	56.5%	62.7%	26.7
Undecided	13.5%	14.7%	12.7%	17.7%	10.1%	9.5%	14.7%
margin of error +/-3%							

2. **Insider Advantage Poll** (June 13, 2012)

32%	Yes
47%	No
21%	Undecided

- Over 60% of Republicans opposed this proposed tax.

3. **T-SPLOST n Poll** (Pro-Referendum Campaign) (July 2012)

47%	Yes
45%	No

*3% margin of error

- Respondents were only previous primary voters and this poll did not include new primary voters.

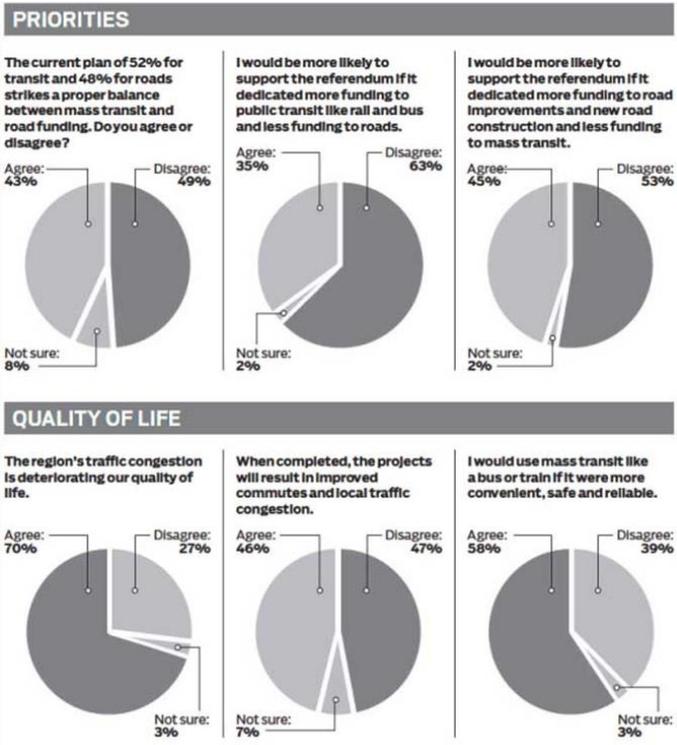
4. **The Atlanta Journal-Constitution & Mason-Dixon Polling & Research** (July 30, 2012)

51%	Yes
42%	No
7%	Undecided

- In referendums, undecided voters tend to vote “no” on tax measures, according to referendum experts.²⁰
- 75% of voters who were polled said that the referendum’s project proposal ratio of roads and mass transit was not balanced.
- 90% of this poll’s respondents agreed that Atlanta’s transportation challenges should be tackled.
- Almost 2/3 of poll respondents said they would be less likely to vote for a project proposal that included more transit projects and a smaller number of roads. However, 50% of respondents said they would be less likely to support a proposal with more road funding and less transit funding.
- Poll showed the campaign for the referendum has swayed 8% more voters than the campaign against the referendum.²¹
- Poll showed that the campaign for the referendum had 29% of support with Republican women.
- Poll showed that the campaign for the referendum had a 60% of support with Democrats.

²⁰ Hart, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, 7/30/12

²¹ Hart, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, 7/30/12



Lessons Learned

Build consensus around transportation in the future. The pro-groups were fragmented and did not align their messaging efforts. Pro-referendum groups need to streamline messaging and marketing efforts.

Potential allies in the campaign instead became enemies. Bringing in new stakeholders—like environmental groups and NAACP— could help create a broader and more inclusive coalition to win over voters.

Official Text of Referendum

Shall _____ County's transportation system and the transportation network in this region and the state be improved by providing for a 1 percent special district transportation sales and use tax for the purpose of transportation projects and programs for a period of ten years?

() Yes

() No

*Each region's ballot is specialized to represent the suggested transportation needs of said region, and the description listed above the ballot question will read accordingly.

²² Source: <http://www.ajc.com/news/news/state-regional-govt-politics/prospects-dicey-for-regional-t-splst-referendum/nQXbh/>

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