**MEMPHIS, TN**

Transportation Funding Initiative

**Background Information**

Memphis’ public transit system was ranked the 69th worst among 100 of the biggest cities in the United States, according to a Brookings Institution Study.

According to the Memphis Area Transit Authority (MATA), 65% of residents in Memphis have used public transportation, and MATA transports approximately 35% of Tennessee’s entire ridership. Prior to this funding proposal, the MATA announced plans to reduce its bus service, which included a new Poplar Avenue express service.\(^1\)

**Election Cycle:** November 2012

**Type:** Memphis Gas Tax Referendum—“The 1-Cent-Per-Gallon-Gas-Tax Referendum”

**Sponsor:** Memphis City Council Member Edmund Ford Jr.

**Overview:** The Memphis City Council passed legislation in 2012 to allow Memphis voters to confirm a one cent-per-gallon gasoline tax increase proposal. With a vote of 8 to 3, the city council members directed this issue to the voters in the form of a referendum. City Councilmember Edmund Ford Jr. speculated that the referendum would pass because he had “talked to a diverse group of individuals, and their response was, ‘It’s only one cent.’”\(^2\)

**Referendum Summary:** The proposed one-cent-per-gallon tax increase on Memphis gasoline sales would use the revenue to support the Memphis Area Transit Authority (MATA). This new tax revenue would allocate $3 million per year to MATA, which would allow the agency to focus on the eight corridor routes that were most frequently used by commuters. MATA planned on increasing the hours and frequency of these popular commuter and local convenience routes. The MATA gas tax utilization strategy would be to prioritize and address the city’s fixed route bus services.\(^3\)

**Status of Referendum:** Failed

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<tr>
<td><strong>FOR</strong></td>
<td>38.15%</td>
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<td>AGAINST</td>
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**Overview of City Charter Amendment/Referendum & Campaign**

The central grassroots mobilization was organized by the Sierra Club Chickasaw Group. They mobilized a coalition, which included support from ADAPT of Tennessee, Latino Memphis, the League of Women Voters, Livable Memphis, the Memphis Bus Riders Union, the Memphis Center for Independent Living, [Bill Dries, Memphis Daily News](#), [Callahan, 8/7/12](#), and [MATA Fact Sheet](#).

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1. Bill Dries, Memphis Daily News
2. Callahan, 8/7/12
3. MATA Fact Sheet
Mid-South Peace & Justice Center and the National Federation of the Blind of Tennessee. There was not any formal or organized opposition to the referendum.

Tennessee Transportation Commissioner John Schroer stated that Tennessee’s current gasoline tax was not a sustainable revenue source to support the state’s long-term infrastructure needs. Schroer said, “I think at some point in time we as a nation are going to have to go to some form of vehicle miles traveled that we’re going to pay for what we use…we need to look at infrastructure like your water bill or electric bill – you just pay for the part of it that you use.”

**Proponents of Referendum**

**Public Officials Who Voted In Favor of Gas Tax Proposal:**

- Memphis City Council Member Edmund Ford Jr. (Sponsor of Bill)
- Memphis City Council Member Bill Boyd
- Memphis City Council member Harold Collins
- Memphis City Council Member Janis Fullilove
- Memphis City Council Member Wanda Halbert
- Memphis City Council Member Lee Harris
- Memphis City Council Member Myron Lowery
- Memphis City Council Member Bill Morrison

**Coalition: Sierra Club and Livable Memphis**

- Local Sierra Club, Chickasaw Group
- ADAPT of Tennessee
- Latino Memphis
- League of Women Voters
- Livable Memphis
- Memphis Bus Riders Union (MBRU)
- Memphis Center for Independent Living (MCIL)
- Mid-South Peace & Justice Center
- The National Federation of the Blind of Tennessee
- Community Development Council

**Opposition to Referendum**

Some members of the Memphis City Council opposed this tax increase proposal, especially because of the difficult economic times.

- Memphis City Council Member Kemp Conrad
- Memphis City Council Member Reid Hedgepeth
- Memphis City Council Member Jim Strickland

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4 Dries, *Memphis Daily News*
5 *Flyer Staff Editorial, 11/1/12*
Pro-Referendum Campaign Strategies and Tactics/Campaign Advertising Materials

**Coalition Leadership:** Sierra Club’s Dennis Lynch is the chairman of the transportation committee of the local chapter of the Sierra Club, which is called the Chickasaw Group. He said he chose to pursue transportation development projects because “the public needs to be involved in the development process…they can’t just leave it to the politicians and planners. I’m trying to help at the state and local level to get more involvement. Too much of politics these days is based around sound bytes, and not enough goes into studying the core of what’s really going on and trying to understand it and find ways to address it.”

**Campaign Slogan:** “Support Public Transit! And Vote FOR the 1-cent-per-gallon-gas-tax!”

**Mid-South Peace & Justice Center’s Get Out The Vote Efforts**

**Memphis Bus Riders Union:** This organization independently canvassed in support of this one cent/gallon gasoline tax increase proposal. Roughly fifteen union members wearing bright yellow t-shirts carried yellow signs and talked with potential voters about the referendum; they also distributed written materials about the 1-cent gasoline tax. Bennett Foster, from the bus riders union, said that transportation “is not a priority for the city because it’s poor and work-class people of color. We want to make it a priority and we’ll march and demonstrate to make that happen.”

**Separate Rally:** Twenty supporters of the referendum rallied in support of this one-cent gasoline tax increase, and they chanted “one cent makes sense.”

**Pro-Referendum Campaign Advertising Materials:**

![Image](image.png)

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6 Waddell, Memphis Daily News  
7 http://midsouthpeace.org/node/386  
8 Moore, 10/15/12  
9 Maki, 10/26/12
Key Members of Campaign

1. Dennis Lynch, Local Sierra Club Transportation Chair
   Contact Information: 901-213-6088; dmlynch@bellsouth.net

2. José Rodriguez
   Contact Information: 901-726-6404; josue@mcil.org

Why Referendum Failed & Lessons Learned

- **Lack of a Unified Coalition.**

  Although there were several groups who supported the 1-cent gasoline tax, these grassroots efforts became fragmented. Rather than holding a large and unified rally in support of the referendum, the Memphis Bus Riders Union held a rally independently from another rally that was attended by 20 supporters, including members of the local Sierra Club chapter.

- **Short timeframe for campaign and grassroots mobilization.**

  The Memphis City Council passed this proposal in August 2010, and by November 2010, Memphis citizens had to vote on this referendum. This did not allow sufficient time to mobilize robust support for the gas tax, and the groups that did organize in support of the referendum did not appear to effectively work as a unified coalition. Even though there was not any formal opposition to the measure, the pro-referendum campaigns failed to convince voters that this one-cent gas tax should be implemented.

- **Lack of Strong City Leadership.**

  Although City Councilman Edmund Ford Jr. sponsored the referendum, the city council members did not participate in the public debate or actively support the passage of the gas tax.
Text of Referendum

Memphis One Cent Gasoline Tax: Ordinance No. 5464
Shall the Home Rule Charter of the City of Memphis, Tennessee, be amended by adding the following provisions to read as follows:

"The Council of the City of Memphis is authorized by Ordinance to authorize the City of Memphis to levy and collect a one cent gasoline tax on all sales within the city and to authorize the use of revenue derived there from for budget expenditures for public transportation."

For 85244 38.15 %
Against 138203 61.85 %

172/172 precincts reporting

References

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http://www.theatlanticcities.com/politics/2012/11/we-shouldnt-be-surprised-most-transit-referendums-won/3885/#.UieI50REKPY.email

“Memphis City Council Approves Gas Tax Referendum.”


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