Orange County, North Carolina

Transportation Funding Initiative

*Election Cycle:* November 6, 2012

*Type of Initiative:* Referendum

*Title of Initiative:* Orange County Transit Referendum

*Sponsor of Legislation:* The Orange County Board of Commissioners

*Background:* In 2012, the Orange County Board of Commissioners voted 5-2 on legislation that would add a half cent sales tax for transit; the passage of the legislation meant that this would be placed on the ballot for voters to approve in the November 2012 election.

*Status of Legislation:* The transit sales tax referendum passed on November 6, 2012 with 59% support.

*Summary of One-Half Percent Local Sales and Use Tax for Transportation*

If successful, the ballot referendum would raise the County’s sales tax rate to 7.5%, which would then bring in $163 million by 2035.\(^1\)

The new revenues would fund a 17.3 mile light rail system which would connect UNC Hospitals and Durham; in addition, the transportation funds would build an Amtrak station and further develop the County’s bus service system. Orange County and Durham County would pay for their respective portions of the 17.3 mile light-rail system, and they would each pay half of the other transportation-related services (bus service expansion, an express bus, and Amtrak station).\(^2\)

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\(^1\) The Daily Tar Heel

\(^2\) Grubb, 11/6/12
Proponents of Referendum

Proponents of the local sales and use tax increase believe that the plan would help generate future growth and economic development throughout the county. Supporters also highlighted the fact that the plan would help decrease traffic and “promote denser development.”

1. Public Officials in Support of Sales Tax Increase:

- Ellie Kinnaird, North Carolina State Senator
- Verla Insko, North Carolina State Representative
- Mark Kleinschmidt, Mayor of Chapel Hill
- Mark Chilton, Mayor of Carrboro
- Tom Stevens, Mayor of Hillsborough
- Bernadette Pelissier, Chair, Orange County Board of Commissioners
- Valerie Foushee, Orange County Board of Commissioners
- Alice Gordon, Orange County Board of Commissioners
- Penny Rich, Chapel Hill Town Council
- Lee Storrow, Chapel Hill Town Council
- Laurin Easthom, Chapel Hill Town Council
- Donna Bell, Chapel Hill Town Council
- Lydia Lavelle, Carrboro Board of Aldermen
- Michelle Johnson, Carrboro Board of Aldermen
- Sammy Slade, Carrboro Board of Aldermen
- Dan Coleman, Carrboro Board of Aldermen

2. Organizations & Coalitions in Support of Sales Tax Increase:

- Orange County Friends of Transit (Our Future On Track)
- Triangle Transit
- Tar Heels for Transit: This coalition was made up of UNC students, faculty, and staff members.
- Durham-Orange County Friends of Transit
- The Orange County Democratic Party
- The Orange-Chatham Sierra Club
- The Chapel Hill Carrboro Chamber of Commerce
- The Regional Transportation Alliance
- The Orange County Cultural Center
- The Walkable Hillsborough Coalition
- The Alliance for Historic Hillsborough
- The Home Builders Association of Durham, Orange, and Chatham Counties: “Our expression of support for this referendum is based on our faith that regional leaders will invest these funds with the care our overall fiscal situation demands. This is a chance to make public investments that

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3 Grubb, 11/6/12
will benefit those who must rely on transit and benefit the economic engine that drives our region. Transit is such a long range issue that we have to start to build it before the need is critical.”

- Fiscal Conservative Voter: Letter to the Editor in Support of Transit Sales Tax

**Opposition**

- **Smart Transit For Orange County**

  “We are democrats, republicans and unaffiliated voters. We live in the towns and the county. We care about transit – and believe that smart transit will benefit all.”

- **Public Official: District 2 County Commissioner Earl McKee**

  Mr. McKee was the only public official to openly oppose the sales tax proposal.

- **The Orange County Republican Party**

- **Environmental Opposition: Orange County Voice**

  “It’s hard to understand why the DTH would encourage anyone to accept the burden of $1.4 billion light rail in order to have Sunday bus service. That math doesn’t add up. Good transit is a great idea — but light rail is a misfit for Orange County. Voters should vote “no” so that we can work toward a better plan.” - Bonnie Hauser, President of Orange County Voice

- **Some Rural Residents**

  Some rural residents of Orange County argued that the Orange County Transit Referendum would only benefit urban residents and that they would not be able to utilize the transportation services.

**Overview of Main Grassroots Coalition Campaigns**

**Pro-Referendum Campaign: “Our Future on Track Campaign” by the Orange County Friends of Transit**

The Orange County Friends of Transit was the main coalition that strongly advocated for the passage of the Orange County Transit Referendum, which proposed more transportation funding in Orange County, South Carolina. This campaign effectively centralized support from many other organizations to create a united and inclusive coalition. One of the other main groups in this coalition, the Tar Heels for Transit, was a student-based coalition of University of North Carolina (UNC) students, faculty, and staff.

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5 Brittany Wallace, Home Builders Association of DOC
6 [http://www.dailytarheel.com/article/2012/10/transit-tax-is-bigger-than-political-parties](http://www.dailytarheel.com/article/2012/10/transit-tax-is-bigger-than-political-parties)
7 [http://transitfororangecounty.wordpress.com/](http://transitfororangecounty.wordpress.com/)
8 Letter to the Editor: [http://www.dailytarheel.com/article/2012/10/voters-should-vote-no-on-transit-plan#print](http://www.dailytarheel.com/article/2012/10/voters-should-vote-no-on-transit-plan#print)
9 The Daily Tar Heel, 10/21/12
Campaign Strategies & Tactics

This campaign focused on the positive benefits from this transit sales tax referendum. The campaign messaging focused on three main areas:

(1) **Environmental Sustainability & Clean Air.**

The campaign’s website wrote that “the Triangle accounts for 12.7 million gallons of fuel wasted annually because of congestion. A single light rail vehicle removes 60 to 125 cars from the road.”

(2) **Economic Vitality and Economic Growth/Development.**

The campaign focused on how citizens’ quality of life would benefit from the transportation projects. The Our Future on Track website explained the potential for broad economic success: “Preliminary estimates indicate that as many as 6,400 jobs could potentially be created in the Triangle Region by light rail and commuter rail projects, and as many as 350 permanent maintenance and operations jobs. The light rail and commuter rail transit will provide access to the Triangle’s largest employment centers located along the region’s most congested corridors. Bus transit services will also provide additional service to employment centers and extend hours into the evenings and weekends.”

(3) **Social Equity & Economic Success.**

This component of the campaign messaging emphasized both job creation as well as social policy issues related to transit. The campaign’s website discussed how “surveys and demographic projections suggest that 800,000 people in the Triangle might prefer to live in compact, mixed-use communities by the year 2030; bus and rail transit support these types of communities.”

Campaign Marketing & Media Advertising

The Orange County Friends of Transit used several different marketing strategies to gain momentum for the ballot initiative.

- Print Media Advertisements
- Effective Utilization of Social Media (Twitter and Facebook)
### RECEIPTS

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<th>Code</th>
<th>Amount 1</th>
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<td>11c) Outside Sources of Income</td>
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<td>12) TOTAL RECEIPTS</td>
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<td>$6,139.78</td>
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### EXPENDITURES

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<th>Amount 2</th>
</tr>
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<td>13) Disbursements</td>
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<td>13a) Operating Expenditures</td>
<td>(CRO-1310)</td>
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<td>$2,992.05</td>
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<tr>
<td>13b) Contributions to Candidates/Political Committees</td>
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<td>$0.00</td>
<td>$0.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>13c) Coordinated Party Expenditures</td>
<td>(CRO-1310)</td>
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<td>$0.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>14) Aggregated Non-Media Expenditures</td>
<td>(CRO-1315)</td>
<td>$0.00</td>
<td>$0.00</td>
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<td>15) Loan Repayments</td>
<td>(CRO-1420)</td>
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<td>$0.00</td>
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<td>16) Refunds/Reimbursements from the Committee</td>
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<td>$0.00</td>
<td>$1,164.00</td>
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<td>17) In-Kind Contributions</td>
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<td>18) TOTAL EXPENDITURES</td>
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<td>$223.76</td>
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<td>19) Cash on Hand at End</td>
<td></td>
<td>$93.95</td>
<td>$93.95</td>
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Campaign Advertising Materials

VOTE YES FOR TRANSIT

Flip your ballot over and vote FOR TRANSIT

Social Media

Websites: ourt & http://ourtransitfuture.com/

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/OrangeFriendsOfTransit

Twitter: @transitfriends
• Durham-Orange Friends of Transit (DO Transit)

“Durham-Orange Friends of Transit (DO Transit) is an alliance of local organizations, civic leaders and citizens who support regional transit for the Triangle. DO Transit is building public support and political will in Orange and Durham Counties for a forward-looking transit plan that is convenient, accessible and affordable. DO Transit meets periodically and the public is encouraged to attend local meetings.”

Website: http://www.durhamorangefriendsoftransit.org/

E-mail: dotransit@durhamorangefriendsoftransit.org

• Regional Transportation Alliance: Business Coalition Working Toward Regional Transportation Solutions

“Our region is expected to grow by more than a million people in the next two decades. Enhanced transit options in Orange County and throughout the region will be increasingly important to our success and quality of life amidst this growth. The Regional Transportation Alliance enthusiastically supports the vision and leadership of Orange County to move transit forward.”
- Clymer Cease, Chair of the Regional Transportation Alliance

• Chapel Hill-Carrboro Chamber of Commerce

“Investing in infrastructure has always been important to the business community and is part of our Chamber’s agenda. The Chamber’s board unanimously endorsed the transit referendum because it’s good for our economy, good for our community, and good for our region. If we don’t make this investment, we will be at a competitive disadvantage in both recruiting and retaining employers and talent.”
- Barry Leffler, Chair of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro Chamber of Commerce.
Ballot Measure’s Media Endorsements

- The Daily Tar Heel: “The answer is clear. The small tax increase - which amounts to an extra nickel on a $10 purchase – is worth it. The plan might not be perfect, but it will help make the Triangle more livable and sustainable for students and residents alike.”11

- The Chapel Hill News: "If we build it, they will come. But if we don’t build it, they will come anyway. They will come and put increasing development pressure on our rural areas, clog up the roads, consume ever more oil, pump ever more exhaust into the air, and make your drive home even longer and more frustrating than it already is."12

- The Independent Weekly: "Getting cars off the road and people into buses and trains is important not only to ease traffic congestion but to improve the region's air quality. That's why we're saying vote FOR on a half-cent sales tax to fund expanded bus and light rail investments in Orange County. Durham County voters passed a similar measure last year.”

Lessons Learned

- Mobilization by Grassroots Coalition Groups.

The “Our Future on Track” campaign was extremely successful, and the Orange County Friends of Transit organization effectively recruited numerous organizations to support this unified campaign. The “Our Future on Track” campaign also utilized social media and print media to generate awareness about the upcoming ballot initiative. Moreover, the organization sought news media endorsements, which increased the overall media attention given to this local county transit tax.


The campaign’s messaging focused on the Orange County Transit Referendum’s positive benefits with respect to economic success, clean air, and quality of life. Given the struggling economy, the economic arguments in support of growth, development, and job creation were particularly compelling.

- Strong Media Coverage & Newspaper Endorsements.

This transit tax referendum received significant media attention, which helped promote the need for more transportation funding in the county.

- Regional County Momentum.

In addition to Orange County, South Carolina, other local counties were also beginning to consider transportation sales tax legislation. Durham County passed a half-cent sales tax the previous year; and prior to Orange County’s transit tax referendum, Durham County had started to advance transportation policy by “taking a positive step to fund expanded transit,” according to David King, who is the Triangle

11 The Daily Tar Heel, 10/22/12
12 The Chapel Hill News, 10/27/12
Transit general manager.\textsuperscript{13} King also said that “by a substantial majority in both Durham and Orange counties, people have decided to invest local money to provide more transit options for our growing region.”\textsuperscript{14} However, another local county, Wake County, did not hold a sales tax referendum despite the neighboring counties’ transit sales tax efforts.

\textit{Polling Data}

(1) North Carolina/National Poll (August 2012)

\textbf{Poll Methodology:}

This poll was conducted by two polling firms: Public Opinion Strategies (conservative) and Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (liberal).

This poll surveyed 800 Americans, where people were polled throughout the country in addition to specific focus groups conducted in Charlotte, NC, Raleigh, NC, Philadelphia, PA, and Cleveland, OH.

\textbf{Poll Results:}

- 2 out of 3 respondents said that they supported government investment in public transportation.\textsuperscript{15}

- Respondents agreed that transportation improvements were needed, and 59\% said that the system was “outdated, unreliable, and inefficient.

- 64\% of those polled supported improving and creating more public transportation options, which included both rail and buses.

- 68\% of respondents were in favor of increasing “local investment to public transportation,” and perhaps more importantly, 63\% of these people did not use transit. Furthermore, 39\% “strongly” supported expanding this local transportation investment.

\textsuperscript{13} Grubb, 11/6/12
\textsuperscript{14} Grubb, 11/6/12
\textsuperscript{15} Press Release, 9/12/12
Americans clearly believe that our current transportation infrastructure is outdated, and want improved public transportation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My community would benefit from an expanded and improved public transportation system, such as rail and buses.</th>
<th>Total Agree</th>
<th>Total Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I would like more transportation options so I have the freedom to choose where I need to go.</th>
<th>Total Agree</th>
<th>Total Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Our nation’s transportation infrastructure is outdated, unreliable and inefficient.</th>
<th>Total Agree</th>
<th>Total Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Americans of all ideological backgrounds favor public transportation.

Preferred Approach to Reducing Traffic, by Party and Ideology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>New Roads</th>
<th>More Public Transit</th>
<th>Communities with Less Driving</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Democrat</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate Democrat</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate Liberal Republican</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative Republican</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>23%</td>
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</table>

These same preferences apply in the target communities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposal</th>
<th>National</th>
<th>Mecklenburg County, NC</th>
<th>Cuyahoga County, OH</th>
<th>Suburban Philadelphia, PA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improving public transportation</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing communities where people do not have to drive as much</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building new roads</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All/None/DK/NA</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>21%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Text of Legislation

[ ] FOR

[ ] AGAINST

One-half percent (1/2 %) local sales and use tax, in addition to the current sales and use taxes, to be used only for public transportation systems.
References


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http://www.dailytarheel.com/article/2012/10/voters-should-vote-no-on-transit-plan#print

http://www.durhamorangefriendsoftransit.org/


http://www.nrdc.org/media/2012/120912.asp?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+NRDCPressReleases+%28NRDC+Press+Releases%29


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