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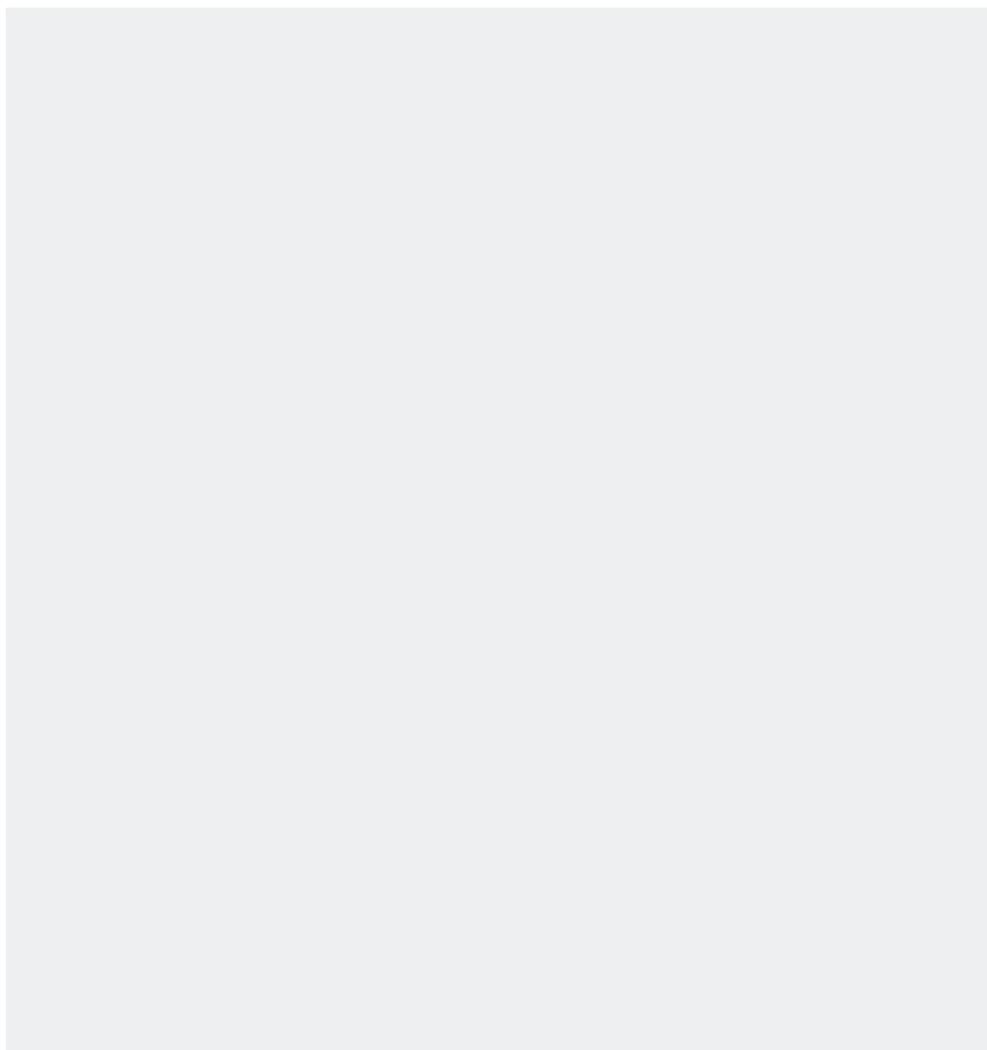
Atlanta area voting today on new tax for more trains, roads



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By Michael Lindenberg
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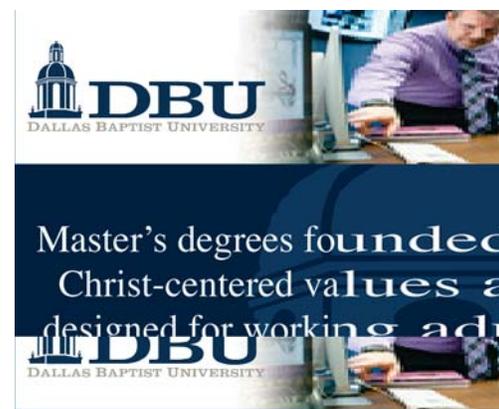


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Transportation writer Michael Lindenberg, reporter Theodore Kim and editorial writer Rodger Jones cover the subject from tollways to traffic, roads to rail. They invite tips and feedback from decision-makers and commuters alike.





In this July 9, 2012, photograph made using a long exposure, traffic moves along Interstate 75 against the downtown skyline in Atlanta. For decades, Atlanta has been the economic engine of the South, a city on the move. But if you've ever tried to drive in the metropolitan area, it doesn't feel that way. Atlanta has some of the worst traffic in America. (AP Photo/David Goldman, File)

Atlanta-area voters are doing today something North Texas leaders have been begging the Texas Legislature to let voters in this area do for years: Vote themselves a large tax increase to pay for more transportation improvements.

Georgia's Legislature, like its counterpart in Austin, has decided it doesn't have the money, and won't raise taxes to get it, to pay to keep traffic moving in its largest metropolitan areas. But unlike in Texas, lawmakers there have agreed to let local communities hold elections to raise sales taxes to pay for the improvements themselves.

In Atlanta's case, a 10-county region is voting in one block. If it passes, the tax will be collected throughout the region, even if voters in a particular city or county opposed the tax.

The money will net the metro region about \$8.5 billion over the next decade, when by law the tax will expire. Area county commissioners developed a list of 157 projects, and most of the money will go to pay for those projects, though 15 percent will be spent by cities and counties as they chose. Also, 52 percent of the money goes to trains and transit and the rest can go to roads. (Read the Atlanta Journal Constitution's [in-depth coverage here](#), and a [FAQ on the issue here](#).)

North Texas leaders have tried three times to [persuade the Texas Legislature](#) to grant communities here the same opportunity to ask voters to tax themselves more for transportation. It passed the

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Senate at least once, but despite a nuclear approach by Sen. John Carona, R-Dallas, in 2009, [the House never followed suit](#). And it has never had the active support of either the governor or lieutenant governor. (The Republican governor in Georgia is fully behind the votes in his state.)

Observers in Georgia say the outcome is uncertain. Some in the city of Atlanta feel too much of the money will be spent out in the suburban counties.

But however the vote goes, it's an important reminder that officials in state capitals, no less than in Washington, are sending a message to urban areas: You're on your own.

In Georgia the lawmakers have pushed off responsibility for keeping their biggest economic region competitive to the voters who live there. So much for the idea that a healthy Atlanta is something even residents of Dalton benefit from.

That's a pretty old-fashioned way of looking at things in Texas, too. If North Texas leaders have their way, the 2013 Legislature will finally give permission for area governments here to ask their own residents to pay more so they can build more transportation projects.

Whatever happens in Georgia today, expect to see its example touted by one side or another of the debate come 2013.



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