

# What The Georgia Vote Means for Transportation

BY: [Ryan Holeywell](#) | August 1, 2012

In a race closely watched by transportation advocates and stakeholders across the country, Atlanta-area voters Tuesday overwhelmingly rejected a plan for a 10-year, 1 percent sales tax that would have supported nearly \$7.2 billion in transportation investments in a 10-county area surrounding the city.

The vote was part of an innovative plan known as Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (T-SPLOST) in which the state was divided into a dozen multi-county regions, and residents of each voted on whether to increase sales taxes in order to fund transportation projects specific to their region.

The thinking among transportation advocates was that if voters could see exactly what they'd get for their money – and they were only being asked to pay for projects in their region– then they'd be more likely to fund the work.

In retrospect, that wasn't the case. In the Atlanta region, the proposal failed spectacularly by a 37 percent to 63 percent vote. It's only poised to be successful in three of the state's 12 special districts.

The vote had been followed by members of the transportation community across the country, largely because of its timing, just a few weeks after Congress passed its surface transportation legislation known as MAP-21. Most transportation observers didn't consider that legislation to be particularly ambitious, since it didn't boost transportation funding, despite calls from many advocates decrying the condition of America's infrastructure. It also didn't tackle the big questions about the growing insolvency of the Highway Trust Fund or how to provide future revenue for transportation.

But many viewed the Georgia vote with some hope. If Congress wasn't willing to make a serious commitment to transportation, would voters at the local level step up?

In the Atlanta region -- the first major metro to face that question in the MAP-21 era -- the answer was no. Tea Party supporters have [characterized](#) their defeat of T-SPLOST as a big win. Their success is especially impressive, given what they were up against. Campaign finance reports indicate that Tea Party groups and other opponents of the tax hike raised about \$15,000 for their cause, compared to \$8 million raised by supporters, according to the [Atlanta Journal-Constitution](#). The tax increase was supported by Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed as well as the business community.

The takeaway from the vote? Support for local transportation projects "is not a given," says David Goldberg, a former *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reporter who's now the communications director at Transportation for America. "Don't take that for granted at all."

Goldberg's organization has advocated for strategic transportation investment and accountability for transportation spending. He says the vote in Atlanta is indicative of the challenges that come with putting regional transportation planning issues to a vote in an area that doesn't have much experience with that approach.

In particular, he cited the list of more than 150 projects that the tax hike would fund in the Atlanta region. The list was the result of negotiations among local officials in the area and ultimately came to resemble a "goodie bag" lacking cohesion, rather than a focused plan that was easy to explain, he says.

Atlanta-area voters also may have been skeptical of the types of projects on the list. Joshua Schank, president of the Eno Center for Transportation think tank, says the list of projects included many capital improvements but fewer improvements to operations, which is where residents would likely see impact on their commutes.

He says supporters of the tax also might have gotten more buy-in if their plan came with clear performance metrics that indicated exactly how the projects would improve traffic in the area, and what would happen if they didn't.

Even Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed, one of the biggest advocates for the tax-hike, acknowledged those criticisms in something of a [concession speech](#) Tuesday night. "We lost the 'confidence in government' argument," he said. "And the argument around whether our projects are transformational."

Schank also says voters have likely become jaded at this point after hearing for years promises from Atlanta politicians about congestion relief. "They've probably said 'let's spend money to fix this' many times, and it hasn't been fixed," Schank says.

Because citizens were voting as a cobbled-together, 10-county unit, there was no single agency that had to take charge for the accountability of the billions of dollars in projects. Instead, authority was split between Georgia Department of Transportation, Georgia Regional Transportation Authority and the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority. That prompted questions among the electorate about who would be accountable for the spending, Goldberg says.

"People are used to having these votes at the county or city level," he explains. "They know who the officials are. They know who to go to if the project list doesn't get built. In this case, one of the big issues was you're asking people to trust government generally, and not specific government officials." Goldberg, for his part, believes that the state legislature designed the T-SPLOST with the expectation that it would fail.

He and others have highlighted several recent cases in which voters approved big transportation investments, suggesting that with the right approach, local referenda can be successful.

In 2008, Los Angeles County voters approved Measure R, which raised the sales tax to pay for transit and road improvements. That same year, Seattle-area voters approved a sales tax increase for transit expansion, and Denver-area voters did the same in 2003. In all of those cases, Goldberg notes, responsibility for spending was tightly concentrated rather than spread among a disparate group of jurisdictions and agencies, which may have given voters more confidence.

But Kerry O'Hare director of policy at Building America's Future, is skeptical of Atlanta-area voters who raised questions about accountability. She says it would be difficult to imagine getting a more detailed list of projects than what was released by the regional districts. "For people to say 'we don't know what the money going to go to,'" O'Hare says, "is not a real argument."

She says the Atlanta situation could impact the national debate. One school of thought that has gained traction in conservative circles is the idea that the federal government should scale back on its transportation investment and instead rely on states and localities to take on more responsibility.

In this case, voters rejected that role, raising the obvious question: if Congress has punted on transportation, and local voters have too, who will ultimately foot the bill? "What are people waiting for?" O'Hare says. "You wonder what the breaking point is."

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