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County OKs mass transit project list, but with no guarantees

By Bill Hirschman
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Broward County commissioners tried to bolster support for a sales tax increase Tuesday by endorsing a list of mass transit projects -- but only after ensuring they would not have to follow any aspect of the plan.

Commissioners feared voters might not approve an increase in the sales tax from 6 cents to 7 cents for a massive expansion of mass transit if they had no idea what they were voting for in the Nov. 7 referendum.

"We owe it to the voters to put it out there with a plan," said Commissioner Diana Wasserman-Rubin. "I want no more delays."

The approval cleared the path for the People for Progress political action committee to ratchet up its pro-tax campaign, including a commercial featuring football legend Dan Marino.

The "2030 Plan," named for the year the last project would be completed, includes:

Buying 106 new buses to decrease waiting times and carry more passengers, \$33.6 million

Creating five express shuttles between two busy locations, \$17 million

Synchronizing traffic lights, \$46.5 million

Building neighborhood bus depots, \$8.1 million

Creating five rapid transit routes with limited stops and possibly a dedicated bus lane, \$135 million

Operating costs through 2030, \$1.6 billion

The plan lacks most of the light rail projects that many officials agree are desperately needed.

It differs from a much more ambitious plan championed by the political action committee and rejected by the County Commission last week. That plan would spend all of the \$14 billion that the tax would raise over 25 years, compared with the 2030 plan, which only spends about \$4 billion.

Commissioner Ilene Lieberman, who lobbied for the 2030 Plan, stressed, "This is just a starting point."

If the tax is passed, the commission plans to consult experts and a citizen's advisory committee before deciding which projects to fund.

"I want us, after the election, to come back with a feasibility plan with some real thought and real purpose instead of just throwing it up on the wall," Commissioner John Rodstrom said.

Trying to win support, Lieberman agreed to ax proposed light rail lines along I-595 and 136th Street because colleague Josephus Eggleton said they were unpopular with constituents or did not serve neighborhoods currently using mass transit.



"595 and 136. That's out," Eggelletion said, looking at Lieberman.

"As a starting point," she repeated.

Even then, the commission only voted 5-4 to endorse the plan with opposition from Eggelletion, Jim Scott, Sue Gunzberger and Lois Wexler.

Rodstrom had voted against scheduling the referendum and against the People for Progress-backed plan, which he considered faulty and misleading. He switched sides Tuesday when he was assured the commission wasn't locked into any part of the plan.

"If it passes, we have carte blanche to do whatever we want," Rodstrom said after the meeting.

The vote encouraged People for Progress, the business-based committee shouldering most of the tax promotion. The group was feeling pinched because absentee voting already has begun and early voting begins Monday.

James Cummings, a building contractor heading the committee, told the commission, "Enough said. Let's get on and vote. You do your job. We'll do ours."

The committee plans to spend "hundreds of thousands of dollars" on television and radio advertisements -- unveiling the one with Marino Tuesday -- a speaker's bureau, a color mailer and unusual tactics such as hoisting cars on cranes along I-95, said Robert Kornahrens, president of Advanced Roofing of Fort Lauderdale.

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