

## Transportation woes

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Some business leaders and politicians feel there was a lack of leadership in this session of the General Assembly on transportation issues. I could not agree more, not because the legislature failed to pass a tax increase, but because no one is attempting to solve Georgia's transportation woes by any other method than throwing money at the problem.

Business leaders, so-called "smart growth" advocates, mass transit enthusiasts, railroad companies and various chambers of commerce from around the metro Atlanta area have formed the "non-profit" Get Georgia Moving coalition in order to influence transportation funding, ease congestion and push economic development. It is almost certain that the issue will surface again in the 2009 legislative session.

No one is arguing that metro Atlanta, including Newton County, does not have transportation issues. No one likes sitting in traffic. However, it is important to look at the details of what powerful lobbying groups were forcing on Georgia taxpayers.

Senate Resolution 845 was a constitutional amendment that would have provided for a regional 1 cent sales tax dedicated to transportation. The amendment, through the enabling legislation (HB 1035), would have allowed an unelected entity, a regional development commission (RDC), to "pass a resolution calling for a referendum within the participating counties." Counties in the region would have 45 days to opt-out and not participate in the tax. The only way a county could opt-out is if its Board of Commissioners voted against it. Even if the voters of our county voted down the referendum, we would still be bound to pay the tax if a majority in the region voted for it. Senate Pro-Tem Eric Johnson found this to be unacceptable, noting that smaller counties in a region would be at the mercy of larger counties. He called it "political suicide" and unfair.

The tax was not limited to a certain period of time. In theory, it could last for 20 years or it could last for 50 years. The length of the tax would be up to the RDC to determine. Also, 20 percent of the funds collected by the tax would have gone back to the state and a whopping 10 percent of that would have been dedicated to mass transit, something less than 4 percent of Georgians actually use (more on that later).

Many legislators and supporters of the scheme say it was not a tax increase. This is simply not true. The proposal did not exempt gas purchases, increasing the price of gas when gas prices are at an all-time high, and the amendment provided the means to increase taxes by factionalizing voters and putting a very powerful, rent-seeking lobby with varying self-interests, against the interests of Georgia taxpayers, who are already overtaxed and are likely facing an economic recession.

Gov. Sonny Perdue and GDOT Commissioner Gena Abraham opposed a new funding mechanism for transportation. In January, Gov. Perdue sent a letter to legislative leaders on transportation issues.

"I am not yet comfortable with our ability to effectively spend the funds we currently have for transportation improvements. I cannot yet guarantee that we are maximizing taxpayers' contributions or getting the best return on investment," wrote Perdue. "At this time, I cannot in good conscience advocate raising taxes on our citizens."

One of Gov. Perdue's legislative priorities was a State Transportation Infrastructure Bank. This proposal was carried by State Rep. John Lunsford, who represents a portion of Newton County. The infrastructure bank provides a short-term solution to local governments short on funding for critical transportation projects.

Since taking the reins and despite her recent problems, Abraham has worked feverishly to make some sense out of the Georgia Department of Transportation. It is clear that they have agreed to take on more projects than they can afford to fund. However, Perdue believes that until the DOT is sorted out and projects are prioritized, more funding could make problems worse.

Some advocates of the tax believe that transportation woes can be solved in part by spending a significant amount of money on commuter rail like the proposed Atlanta-Macon or Atlanta-Athens lines.

History shows that these rail lines do very little to relieve congestion. "There is no evidence that [rail] works anywhere in the country," says Randal O'Toole, an adjunct scholar with the Cato Institute.

A new policy analysis written by O'Toole shows that transit's market share has been in decline for the last 20 years. In Atlanta, transit's share of passenger miles has decreased from 1.9 percent in 1985 to 1.1 percent in 2005. The total number of commuters using rail declined from 9.1 percent in 1980 to 4.4 percent in 2005. Similar trends can be found in other, higher density areas like Baltimore, Chicago, Dallas, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and St. Louis.

Transit enthusiasts will no doubt respond that transit has not been adequately funded by Georgia lawmakers. O'Toole notes, "States have spent hundreds of billions of dollars on transit and ridership has not increased." People simply will not get out of their cars, despite high gas prices, enough to justify spending billions on rail.

It is also important to note that the tax scheme would not have covered operating expenses for local governments along the rail line. It almost seems that this was purposefully left out of the proposal. There are only a couple of ways to cover that shortfall. Local governments would have had to cut services or raise property taxes.

O'Toole also takes on the claim that rail will lessen the impact on the environment. O'Toole writes, "Most rail transit lines use more energy per passenger mile, and many generate more greenhouse gases, than the average passenger automobile." He adds, "Rail transit provides no guarantee that a city will save energy or meet greenhouse gas targets."

There are other solutions that will lessen the burden carried by taxpayers that could solve our traffic problems. Some market-based solutions have been tried with success in other parts of the country. The 91 Express Lanes in Orange County, California are one example. The 91 Express Lanes is a toll road that was built by a private company at no cost to taxpayers. It serves more than 40,000 commuters a day with congestion-free lanes and market-based prices. While commuters can take their chances with traffic in the "regular" lanes, those taking the 91 Express Lanes drive by in congestion-free traffic. Since they were opened in December 1995, the lanes have saved more than 32 million hours of commuting time and have added \$480 million to the economy.

Another example of the market at work is the Selmon Expressway in Tampa, Fla. Commuters can pay a toll to drive on an elevated bridge in the middle of State Road 618.

Prioritization of transportation projects, better management of existing roads and highways and looking to private sources like toll roads are the best way to decrease congestion and improve quality of life in Metro Atlanta. Raising taxes should be the last resort for policy-makers.