

New poll: Americans want more transit, and most would pay more for it



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Americans want more money spend on public transportation, says a poll commissioned by transportation advocacy group **Transportation For America**.

The telephone survey of 800 registered voters -- including 100 by cell phone -- was released today just before noon. (Poll results here) The group lays out **its platform here**, wants to link transportation policy with energy and climate goals, and find new ways to pay for roads, bridges and rail than the old gasoline tax. It favors public private partnerships, but wants limits on the deals to protect the public interest.

The poll, which has a margin of error of +/- 3.46%, suggests voters:

- 87 percent in big cities (and 69 percent overall) believe their community would benefit from "an expanded and improved public transportation system."
- 73 percent agree that they have "no choice but to drive as much as I do," and 57 percent (here's a shocker!) would like to spend less time in their vehicle.
- Two thirds want more transportation options.
- 59 percent say they'd like to take public transportation more often, but it's not convenient.
- For those who haven't taken transit in the past month, most say it's because it's not available (47 percent) or not convenient (35 percent.)
- 57 percent said rail and trains are too often ignored by federal legislation -- and funding.
- A very narrow majority say they are willing to pay a small tax increase to increase public transportation options in their area.

The last bullet point is the kicker, of course. And it's not much of an endorsement. Strongly opposed folks outnumbered those strongly in favor (32 percent to 23 percent). Then there is the language of the question -- it asks folks if they'd be willing to pay more for transit options in their community. But no bill would be able to build trains and bus lines everywhere they are needed. And some of

those supporters would likely not support bills that end up putting trains and buses in other people's neighborhoods.

It's a dilemma that has surfaced throughout the debate in the Texas Legislature: Should all Texans pay higher taxes to improve transportation in the big cities? Or just the people who live in those cities? It's also something that has been asked at more local levels, when **Addison** voters have asked themselves whether they ought to pay for a rail system that may never reach them.

Another way of looking at the poll is to see it as an opening volley, and helpful one, in what will soon be a ferocious battle among advocacy groups, lobbyists, industry and state and local governments as the scrum over the next federal authorization bill commences.

In theory, **Congress** passes a transportation authorization bill every six years, laying out a detail plan for how highways, bridges and rail plans will be funded for the next six years.

It authorizes the grant programs that fund most of the federal projects and forecasts how much revenue will be collected by gasoline taxes, for instance.

It's also almost always late. This time around is no exception. The previous authorization expired in 2009, but has been on life support since, thanks to emergency extensions that have involved Congress shoveling general fund moneys over to the highway trust fund to keep it solvent.

But when Congress passed the new jobs act -- the \$18 billion package some have labeled Son of Stimulus -- it included a full one-year extension for the highway authorization, keeping the money flowing for road projects and giving Congress and dozens of lobbying groups breathing room to prepare for the big fight. President Obama signed the bill earlier this month.

It will be a big fight, because it's going to be big money. House transportation chairman James Oberstar of Minneapolis has already proposed spending \$500 billion in the next six-year bill, including fully \$50 billion on high speed rail.

President Obama has fought back against tackling such a massive endeavor so soon into his administration, given his other priorities (you may have heard of the health care bill), but that delay could run its course this year. Earlier this year, when the jobs bill cleared the Senate, it won approval from holdout **Senator George Voinovich**, who said he was promised a vote on the transportation re-authorization bill later this year by none other than Senate boss **Harry Reid**.

The current funding scheme -- which includes 20-cents per gallon gasoline tax to fund the highway trust fund and transit -- would only produce a little more than half that much money over six years, and so any talk of a massive increase in spending will either mean more borrowing or new tax increases, or both.