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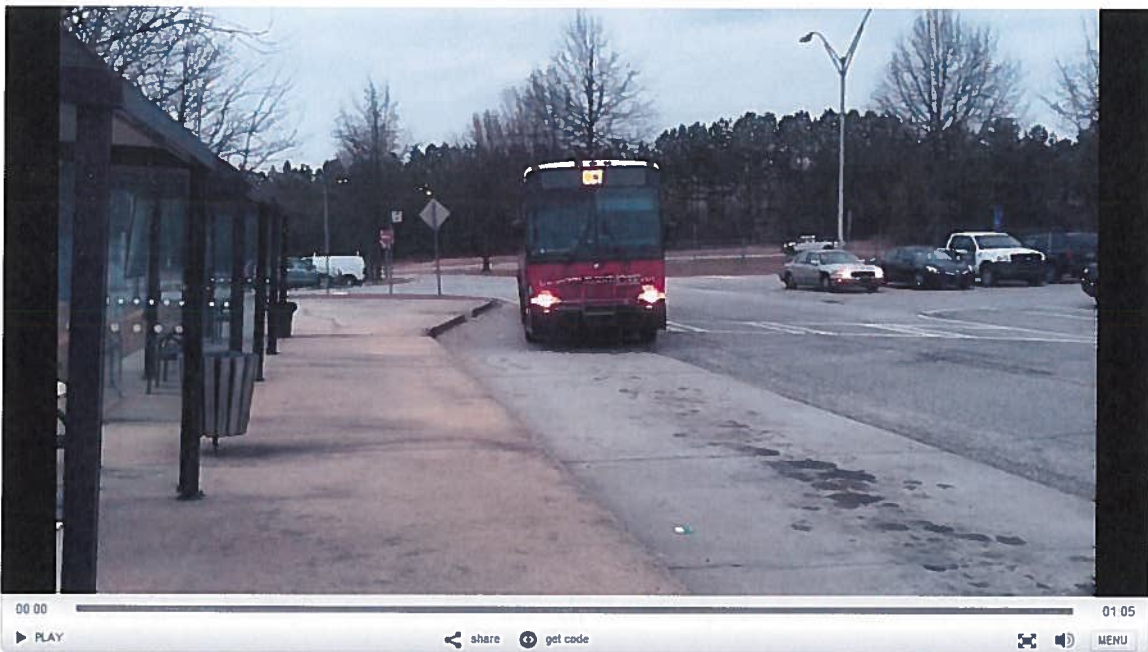
MARTA: No longer a dirty word in Gwinnett?

LOCAL GOVT & POLITICS

By **David Wickert** - The Atlanta Journal-Constitution



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For decades, the most toxic letters in Gwinnett County politics were M-A-R-T-A.

Voters in Georgia's second-largest county repeatedly rejected MARTA commuter rail or anything that looked like it.

But the lay of the land has shifted since 1990, the last time an official vote was held on expanding MARTA into Gwinnett. Hundreds of thousands of new

residents now call the area home, many of whom are accustomed to the convenience of mass transit.

And there's a growing clamor from local business leaders who worry that economic development will suffer without such amenities.

Last year, a **Chamber of Commerce** poll showed half of likely voters supported a one percent sales tax to bring MARTA – not “commuter rail” or some other euphemism, but MARTA – to Gwinnett.



Susan Levine of Duluth arrives from work at the Indian Trail Park in Norcross last week. Levine is a long-time transit ... [Read More](#)

“Attitudes have changed,” said Joe Allen, executive director of the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District in Duluth. “People are talking about this.”

Still some skeptics – including incumbent County Commission Chairman Charlotte Nash – doubt attitudes about MARTA have changed so much that Gwinnett voters would approve an expansion.

“A referendum for MARTA will not pass in Gwinnett County at this time,” Nash told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution recently.

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But even Nash has indicated she'd consider other options, like bus rapid transit — a sign that the politics of mass transit in Gwinnett have moved beyond simply saying “no.”

Voters rejected proposals to join the regional transit agency in 1971 and in 1990. They did it again in 2008, in a straw poll conducted by the Republican and Democratic parties. And, in 2012, they shot down a regional sales tax proposal that, among other things, would have provided seed money for unspecified transit options to link the I-85 corridor to MARTA in Doraville.

Gwinnett provides express bus service to Atlanta and some local bus routes. But MARTA remains a dirty word for many residents who don't think it can solve the county's traffic problems.

“MARTA is poorly designed, poorly executed and poorly run,” said Ted Asher of Lilburn.

But some business leaders have long seen rail transit as a traffic solution and a key to economic development. They say Gwinnett already has missed some opportunities to attract businesses and fear the county won't be able to compete in the long run without better transit options.

“We're not in discussions for the Mercedes, the State Farms and the NCRs of the world because we don't have transit,” said Chuck Warbington, executive director of the Gwinnett Village Community Improvement District in Norcross.

Transit advocates say Gwinnett's population has changed dramatically since the last official MARTA vote. Its population has risen from about 353,000 to about 878,000 people.

“I think the idea of being trapped with one option, just using a car, is a cultural thing that's beginning to change nationwide,” Warbington said.

Last year's Chamber of Commerce poll found 63 percent of likely voters in Gwinnett favored bringing in MARTA, though support dropped to 50 percent when respondents were asked if they'd pay a 1 percent sales tax to fund it.

The poll showed Democrats are far more willing to consider MARTA than Republicans. Though Republicans have long dominated Gwinnett politics, some Democrats think they've found a winning issue.

Mass-transit advocate Jack Snyder **recently announced** he'll run for chairman of the Gwinnett Board of Commissioners. And Democrats in the General Assembly **recently introduced** a resolution calling for a MARTA vote in Gwinnett this year.

That's not likely to happen. Gwinnett leaders already plan to ask voters in November to renew an existing 1 percent sales tax for transportation, parks and other construction projects.

Even transit advocates like Warbington say the county should focus first on renewing the existing sales tax. But they see an opportunity for a transit vote in 2017 or 2018.

Nash thinks Gwinnett's rejection of the 2012 regional transportation sales tax remains the best gauge of where voters stand.

But even some MARTA opponents say the region must do something to address its clogged highways. Asher, the Lilburn resident, said he supports mass transit, just not MARTA. He'd like to see a light rail line with expanded local bus service, a system that connects "people and places, not parking lots and highways."

This week, Nash herself opened the door to a MARTA alternative in her annual "state of the county" address. She laid out a vision of Gwinnett's future that includes bus rapid transit – a form of transit that involves large buses departing from transit stations and using dedicated lanes to carry commuters.

After the speech, Nash called bus rapid transit "one of those possibilities that warrants exploration" as the county updates its **long-term transportation plan** over the next year.

Gwinnett Place's Allen said bus rapid transit could be an interim solution that paves the way for rail service later.

"We've got to decide, what are the right transit options for Gwinnett County?" he said.

Mass transit in Gwinnett County

1971: Gwinnett voters reject MARTA, even as other counties embrace it.

1990: Gwinnett voters again reject MARTA.

2001: Gwinnett County Transit begins express bus service to Atlanta.

2002: Gwinnett begins local bus service.

2006: The Georgia Regional Transportation Authority begins additional express bus routes from Gwinnett to Atlanta.

2008: In straw polls conducted by the Republican and Democratic parties, Gwinnett voters once again reject MARTA.

2012: Gwinnett voters overwhelmingly reject a regional transportation sales tax proposal that includes seed money for unspecified transit options linking the I-85 corridor in Gwinnett to MARTA in Doraville.

2015: A Gwinnett Chamber of Commerce poll shows 50 percent of likely voters would pay a 1 percent sales tax to bring MARTA to the county.

2015: Local groups sponsor the Gwinnett Great Exchange on Transportation, a series of in-person and online discussions about transit, which finds a desire for options like rail transit.

February 2016: In her "state of the county" speech, County Commission Chairman Charlotte Nash shows illustrations of Gwinnett's future that include bus

rapid transit, a kind of bus service that some see as an interim step toward rail transit.

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