

# ATLANTA BUSINESS CHRONICLE



## **GWINNETT RESETS AFTER TRANSIT TAX FAILS**

Rideshare will be a priority, but bus expansion uncertain

Ride Gwinnett buses coming and going at MARTA's Doraville station. The transit tax recently rejected by Gwinnett voters would have funded a bus rapid transit line between the Doraville station and a Lawrenceville transfer station.

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For the fifth time in history, Gwinnett voters recently turned down a sales tax to fund transit expansion in the sprawling suburban county to the northeast of Atlanta.

Gwinnett officials, who see the case for more transit in Georgia's second-most populous ([and still growing](#)) county, returned to the drawing board after a 2020 referendum to join MARTA failed by roughly 1,000 out of 398,000 votes.

The latest proposal did not rely on MARTA. It would have established a one-penny sales tax to fund capital and operational costs for expansive rideshare, high-capacity bus lines and shuttles to the Atlanta airport to be managed by the county's own transit operator Ride Gwinnett.

But the [MARTA-free proposal failed by an even wider margin on Nov. 5](#) than the previous one that involved the region's largest transit agency. County leaders still hope to deliver more service, but funding some projects without a dedicated tax would likely be difficult.

Business boosters, transit advocates and some elected officials view public transportation options as a solution to accommodate growth, improve social equity and make commuting more bearable for car-free workers.

"We've got a lack of options, and we don't move around the region the way other regions do," said Geoff Koski, president of real estate and economic development consulting group KB Advisory Group.

"We're not functioning as efficiently as a local economy without being fully connected with transit," he continued.

### **Economic fears contributed to voters' rejection**

Atlanta's northern suburbs have historically balked at transit expansion. In the 1970s and 1990s, when a majority of Gwinnett residents were white, MARTA referendums [failed in part due to racist attitudes](#) about public transit.

In the past decade or so, Gwinnett officials have asked voters again and again to support a transit tax in what is now the most racially and ethnically diverse county in the state and home to more than 1 million residents after major growth spurts.

Local leaders had hoped that a MARTA-free proposal would make it across the finish line, following the narrow 2020 defeat in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. More than 90% of respondents in a [recent Atlanta Regional Commission survey](#) stated that improving public transit is important to the region's future.

An uncertain U.S. economy likely persuaded some voters to turn down the new tax, especially one that would last for three decades, according to county officials. In the same ARC survey, most respondents cited the economy as the biggest problem facing the region. Despite low unemployment and slowing inflation, consumer prices and housing costs remain elevated above pre-pandemic levels.

“This is not a partisan issue,” said Nicole Love Hendrickson, chairwoman of the Gwinnett County Board of Commissioners. “It’s an issue of economics and also an issue of personal preference. People love their cars. At the end of the day, they’re going to be sitting in cars complaining about traffic, not realizing that they are traffic.” Other voters were likely turned off by the absence of heavy rail and MARTA connections. But county officials excluded that on purpose, based on community feedback from voters who suggested they would be more likely to support a tax to build out the county’s own transit system.

“If you had 10 people, all of them are going to come up with a different answer on what they would vote for,” said Matthew Holtkamp, the only county commissioner who voted against [placing the referendum on November ballots](#).

### **More services could be gradually rolled out**

With or without a special tax, Gwinnett needs more transit to serve residents who depend on it to get to work and school, Hendrickson said. Local leaders plan to get together to analyze what led to the recent outcome and figure out what can be accomplished without a sales tax, she said.

Ride Gwinnett is currently funded by property taxes, which will remain the case. County leaders will try to supplement costs with federal and state dollars, as well as a general transportation tax that is already in place, Hendrickson said.

The sales tax had been estimated to collect \$17 billion in revenue over 30 years. The projects it would have funded come from a [transit development plan](#) adopted in 2023. County leaders plan to stick with that plan, but it will need to be scaled and implemented over a longer time period, Hendrickson said.

The bulk of the transit tax would have gone toward covering the entire county with microtransit, a [locally funded form of rideshare service](#) with lower fares than private operators such as Uber or Lyft.

Ride Gwinnett currently offers microtransit in the Lawrenceville, Snellville and Norcross areas. Passengers can request a ride to anywhere within a designated zone or travel to farther distances by being dropped off at a bus stop.

The county will likely focus on gradually offering microtransit in more places, Hendrickson said. The service could support Gwinnett businesses, particularly retailers who struggle to recruit and retain car-free workers, said Joe Allen, executive director of the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District.

“When it comes to public transit, my attitude is slow and steady wins the race,” said Holtkamp, who is also a local business owner. “You figure out which markets could actually use this microtransit. Once people start using that and they actually like it, they might start using the bus line a little bit more.”

Another feasible option in the near term could be running shuttles between Gwinnett County and Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, Hendrickson said. Approximately 10,000 local residents travel to the Atlanta airport each day, according to the county.

“We’re heavily auto-dependent, and congestion is going to be with us forever,” Hendrickson said. “But if we can offer some short-term, small relief, it’s still making a difference.”

### **Bus expansion is uncertain**

When and how the county could come up with the funding to build and sustain other projects is unclear.

The tax also would have funded a bus rapid transit line from MARTA’s Doraville station to a Lawrenceville transfer station. BRT is intended to mimic the speed of rail by providing buses with dedicated lanes and other features to bypass traffic.

The BRT line would link Gwinnett Place Mall to [Gas South District](#), both of which have been eyed for mixed-use development in recent years. Other proposed stops include Sugarloaf Mills, Northside Hospital Gwinnett, Gwinnett Technical College and Gwinnett College.

“As we’re talking about [the transformation of the Gwinnett Place area](#), mobility choice has got to be a part of that equation, especially if we want it to become the urban core of Gwinnett County in the 21st century,” said Allen, referring to the BRT line.

The 2023 plan also calls for arterial rapid transit lines, which provide buses with traffic signal prioritization and opportunities to pass other vehicles. The network of standard bus routes would be expanded, and transfer centers would be built to move people throughout the county.

It takes time for people to adopt transit, said Holtkamp, who favors a “less aggressive” expansion. He believes that the system would have remained underutilized under the program, which would have led voters not to renew the tax to support operations in the future.

“This would have been the biggest financial debacle in Gwinnett County history if it had passed,” Holtkamp said.

Like other U.S. transit agencies, Ride Gwinnett has struggled to retain ridership over the past decade. Creating a frequent, reliable and accessible network is key to attracting riders who have other choices and those who depend on it, according to transportation experts.

On the same day as Gwinnett's election, [Cobb County voters rejected a similar proposal](#) that would have established a one-penny sales tax to fund expansive rideshare service, new bus lines and mobility improvements. Some voters were not fully aware of what the sales taxes would have funded, said Matt Stigall, executive director of advocacy group Cobb 4 Transit.

Expanding transit could help Gwinnett and Cobb compete for white-collar jobs, Koski said. Transit unlocks the potential to build denser development with housing and amenities – attractive qualities to office tenants looking to retain and recruit workers, he said.

“We’re going to continue to grow,” Stigall said. “Traffic is going to continue to get worse than it already is. We can’t just keep building more and more highways and roads. We’ve got to come up with solutions that are more efficient, that allow people to have a choice and wind up taking cars off the road.”