On Politically Tricky Transit Projects, Many Cities Let Voters Weigh In.

Cities nationwide have crafted and acted on ambitious blueprints for light-rail and other forms of mass transit, but unlike the Twin Cities, many of them have asked their voters whether they want higher taxes to help pay for it.

Ballot initiatives "give local officials the ability to turn a tricky political decision over to the voters," said Jason Jordan, executive director of the Center for Transportation Excellence, a Washington, D.C., group that tracks transit spending. Since 2000, transportation initiatives have been on the ballot in 41 states, with an average of 71 percent passing.

A referendum of this sort has not been considered in Minnesota because the Legislature would have to authorize it. And, since efforts to pass a half-cent metro sales tax for transportation were thwarted by light-rail-averse Republicans last spring, that seems unlikely.

The final piece of local funding for the $1.79 billion Southwest light-rail line, totaling $135 million, is now in doubt. The fate of close to $900 million in federal matching funds for the controversial project is murky as well.

Partisan politics over mass transit haven't necessarily played out nationally the way they have in Minnesota, according to Jordan. "We have found no partisan connection with these [transit] measures at all," he said. "Voters really have a chance to evaluate whether they believe there's value in a project or not."

This fall, Seattle-area residents will vote on an initiative called Sound Transit 3 that calls for new sales and property taxes to fund $53.8 billion in transportation projects, including 62 additional miles of light rail.

Voters in the car-clogged Los Angeles area will decide in November whether to increase a county sales tax by half a cent for the next 40 years, raising about $120 billion to expand mass transit and various transportation initiatives.

Other cities, including Dallas, Phoenix and Denver, have used voter-approved tax revenue to build transit systems that are far more expansive than the Twin Cities', which at the moment has two light-rail lines spanning 23 miles.

Dallas, Texas' third-largest city, boasts a $5 billion light-rail network that is the longest of its kind in the country with some 90 miles of track. Last summer, Phoenix voters approved a $31.5 billion transportation plan for the next 35 years that includes a transit sales tax increase to 0.7 percent. The funds will help build 42 miles of light rail.

In Denver, a city often seen as a peer to the Twin Cities, voters in 2004 approved the $4.7 billion FasTracks program, which added 122 miles of new commuter and light-rail lines in the region, as well as bus-rapid transit (where buses operate like trains) and related infrastructure.

However, Denver discovered the hard way how sales taxes ebb and flow with the economy. Once the Great Recession hit, costs of the transit program ballooned to nearly $7 billion, leaving a budget gap of $2.2 billion. A unique public-private partnership involving local businesses stepped in to help fund several rail lines, including one connecting Union Station in downtown Denver to the Denver International Airport.

Now back on track, transit options in Denver have been crucial in attracting millennials to the city, as well as $5.5 billion in transit-oriented development, said Nate Currey, spokesman for the Regional Transportation District. “You do not have to have a car to live here,” he said, adding that aging baby boomers are shedding their wheels, too.

Transit “is a big economic competitiveness issue for us to compete as a region,” said Adam Duininck, chairman of the Metropolitan Council, the regional body in the Twin Cities that plans and operates transit. “When you look at how we compare to other regions, we do well in all areas except for transit.”

There is a little-known transit sales tax in the metro area that has played a key role in funding big projects, such as the nearly $1 billion Green Line, linking the downtowns of Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Since 2008, five Twin Cities metro counties — Hennepin, Ramsey, Washington, Anoka and Dakota — have used the quarter-cent sales tax and a $20 motor vehicle sales tax to invest in transit projects administered by a group of mostly elected officials called the Counties Transit Improvement Board (CTIB). And 10 years ago, a general referendum question passed by voters dedicated 40 percent of motor vehicle sales tax proceeds to transit over a five-year period.

But Dakota County, unhappy with its return from the transit tax, voted last month to leave the group, and other suburban counties may follow.

If cities are unable to raise local money for big transit projects like light rail, they are in danger of losing matching dollars from the Federal Transit Administration. The FTA’s New Starts program, which pays out about $2.3 billion a year for new light rail, commuter rail and bus-rapid transit projects costing more than $250 million, looks first for a local funding commitment before awarding its grant money.

The competition for FTA money is fierce, transit experts say.

“You snooze, you lose,” said Hennepin County Commissioner Peter McLaughlin, who chairs CTIB. “If we whiff on [Southwest], we’re letting competitor regions with a vision march ahead of us.”

Critics disagree. Light-rail is “really expensive infrastructure to build and keep up that doesn’t work,” said Kim Crockett, vice president of the Center of the American Experiment, a think tank based in Golden Valley. The race for federal transit dollars — also footed by taxpayers — is a wasteful folly, she said.

Even cities like Seattle that are perceived as being transit-friendly have critics. John Niles, who co-founded a Seattle group called Smarter Transit, says the impending ballot initiative in the Emerald City would cost the average person $1,000 more a year. (The transit agency there, Sound Transit, claims the figure is $200 a year.)

Niles says Seattle should refine its current system — much of which was built after a 2008 referendum added 2 percent in various sales taxes — before expanding it even more. “Let’s use the existing network to its full potential,” he said. “This may be a bridge too far.”

Meanwhile, other cities and regions continue to look to voters for a thumb's up on transportation. This fall, more than 20 regions across the United States — from Pulaski County, Ark., to Kalamazoo, Mich., — will hold referendums to raise money for transportation initiatives, according to the Center for Transportation Excellence.

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