

Transit Tax Gets Closer to Ballot

by [Mike Salinero](#), TampaTrib.com

Hillsborough County commissioners took the first step Wednesday toward putting a 1-cent sales tax increase for mass transit and road improvements on the ballot in November 2010.

The commission voted 5-2 to have the county attorney draw up a resolution that would indicate the commission's support for putting the referendum on the ballot. The commission will vote on the resolution at its Dec. 2 meeting.

Commissioners Jim Norman and Al Higginbotham voted against the motion. Norman said the list of recommended projects passed by the county's Transportation Task Force amounted to a "fragmented" system that would not alleviate traffic congestion or spur economic development.

"It's a broken system; it's not a complete system that will work and have the biggest return on economics," Norman said.

Higginbotham dismissed claims by supporters of the sales tax that Pasco and Pinellas counties are also considering similar referendums to build transit systems that would connect with Hillsborough's.

Higginbotham pointed out that a majority of Hillsborough commissioners had voted to fund renovating the Friendship TrailBridge because of a promise that Pinellas would pay half the costs, but the Pinellas County Commission voted 7-0 against funding repairs to the bridge.

Commissioners Mark Sharpe, Kevin White, Rose Ferlita, Kevin Beckner and Chairman Ken Hagan, however, spoke Wednesday in favor of putting the tax on the ballot.

White said there has been talk in the community for years about the need for an effective mass transit system.

"This is an opportunity for this commission to get off the dime and put it before the voters ... and see what the taxpayers want to do about improving transportation," White said.

The Transportation Task Force recommended that 75 percent of the tax proceeds go to mass transit, including a number of new, improved bus lines and a light rail system connecting downtown Tampa with the University of South Florida and the West Shore business district. The remainder would be designated for roads, bridges, bike paths and trails.

Even if the commission approves the resolution Dec. 2, it will have to take another vote in the spring to put the ordinance on the ballot. The ordinance would include a list of

projects that would be funded with the tax money.

A 1-cent, or 1 percent, sales tax would cost a typical family household \$142 a year and an individual householder \$85 a year, the Hillsborough County Metropolitan Planning Organization computed from 2008 Internal Revenue Service standardized deduction tables.