Ultimately the support of Georgia’s Republican governor, Atlanta’s Democratic mayor, and the local and state chambers of commerce wasn’t enough to convince Atlanta-area voters to vote for a one percent sales tax increase to fund a list of regionally chosen transportation projects. Neither were the Atlanta metro region’s notorious traffic congestion and less than comprehensive transit system. Nor the claims by public officials that there was no “plan B” or better option forthcoming for funding the region’s transportation needs. Instead, it was an unlikely alliance on the “No” side that was able to claim victory for sending the Atlanta region’s Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (T-SPLOST) down to defeat in Tuesday’s Georgia primary election.

Indeed the T-SPLOST referendum was defeated in all but three of the 12 specially created regions around the state. The three regions where voters did approve the tax increase for their regional transportation projects were the Central Savannah River Area (which includes the city of Augusta), River Valley (which includes the city of Columbus) and Heart of Georgia Altamaha (a largely rural area).

As a result of the tax increase, the Central Savannah River Area is projected to see revenues of $841 million over the next 10 years to fund its list of projects [2]. The River Valley region will get $594 million for its projects [3]. And the Heart of Georgia Altamaha will receive $399 million for its projects [4].

But the Atlanta referendum was the big prize. Had the referendum been approved there, projected revenues of $7.2 billion would have been put to work on 157 area projects [5].

Its defeat is being hailed as a victory by the anti-tax Tea Party, according to this morning’s Atlanta Journal-Constitution [6] (see also the paper’s postmortem here [7] and the referendum results for all 12 regions here [8]). The Tea Party campaign against the measure overcame a significant funding gap (while proponents had $8 million to work with for education and advocacy efforts, opponents managed to raise only about $15,000). And they formed the most unlikely of alliances with the NAACP and the Sierra Club. The NAACP opposed the referendum on the grounds that there was not enough rail investment planned for communities of color while the Sierra Club said the project list was too focused on building roads that will become quickly congested and encourage more sprawl. Opponents of the measure (and indeed voters interviewed by the AJC Tuesday) expressed distrust in government to do what they said they would do with the tax revenues raised.

The Sierra Club and Atlanta Tea Party, foreseeing Tuesday’s victory, held a news conference last week to lay out their own alternative plan for funding the region’s transportation needs, the alternative weekly Creative Loafing [9] reported [9]. They called for:

- Discarding the state’s current three different motor fuel taxes and enacting one single tax indexed to inflation and dedicated to funding transportation with a portion of the receipts available for operating costs as well as capital and maintenance.
- Allowing any two or more local governments to create, and fully fund, transportation projects
through referenda on local motor fuel or sales taxes and other revenue sources.

- Allowing referenda to levy local fractional sales taxes and motor fuel taxes of less than one percent to fund local transportation purposes.

In addition, the anti-T-SPLOST coalition recommended reforms for the Georgia Department of Transportation and funding fixes for MARTA, the region’s transit system.

But Georgia’s Republican Gov. Nathan Deal and Atlanta’s Democratic Mayor Kasim Reed were still insisting as late as Monday that there was no “Plan B” should the referendum fail.

“Without this referendum, we simply don’t have the resources to ensure that Georgia has an adequate transportation network in the years to come,” Deal said at a rally at the State Capitol.

The governor said after the vote he would not support a sequel to the referendum. Reed sounded like he’d be out too.

“It took four years to get a bill that you all could vote on,” Reed said at Monday’s rally. “If we fail, nobody better come and ask me to do it again.”

So it’s back to the drawing board for transportation advocates in metro Atlanta and other parts of the Peach State. And for those assessing things from farther afield (i.e. those in other state capitals trying to figure out how to fund their own transportation needs), there will likely be plenty of takeaways from the T-SPLOST experience to study in the months ahead. They may discover lessons about localizing transportation funding (were the regions too large and the projects not local enough for some to support?), about the kinds of projects that can win support for new revenue (opponents argued the list of projects in the Atlanta region would have done little to alleviate the region’s traffic congestion problems), about restoring trust in government (opponents argued the case hadn’t been made that government could be trusted to spend new transportation revenues efficiently), about the makeup of the electorate in a primary (would the T-SPLOSTs have fared better in a general election?), about the impact of continuing economic concerns on support for taxation (Georgia still has an unemployment rate higher than the national average), about whether the sales tax is the best mechanism for raising money for transportation projects (while it’s not a direct user fee like the gas tax, supporters argued that those making a purchase and paying a sales tax benefit from the transportation infrastructure that brought that product to market), and about the importance of coalition building and messaging for both sides in a referendum vote.

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