Nashville transit advocates are left pondering the future and examining what went wrong after a transit ballot referendum was defeated in the May 1 Tennessee primary. The referendum, which was made possible by state legislation approved last year, would have increased four taxes to fund a multi-billion dollar transit plan that included five light rail lines, a tunnel under downtown, new electric buses, bus rapid transit lines and two-dozen new neighborhood transit centers. Sixty-four percent of voters rejected the measure and the defeat appears likely to have potential long-term implications for the city’s transportation system, politics and economic interests and could provide lessons to other communities around the country that may be looking to upgrade transit offerings in the years ahead.

The Post-Mortem Begins

With just five of 35 Metro Council districts voting for the referendum, the rejection appeared to cast doubt over the future of transit in Nashville.

As the results of the transit vote became known, Nashville Mayor David Briley said in a statement, “We can all agree that we have to do something about traffic and transportation, but voters didn’t get behind this plan. My responsibility as Mayor is to get back to the drawing board and find the common ground to develop consensus on a new way forward. Our transportation problems are not going away; in fact, we know they’re only going to get more challenging as we continue to grow.”

Supporters of the plan said they would begin immediately breaking down the election results precinct by precinct to see how people voted and why. But as The Tennessean newspaper reported, the transit debate appeared to have exposed a generational divide between younger Nashvillians who live in gentrifying neighborhoods close to downtown who embrace the idea of transit and others who felt the transit plan went too far.

Among the other factors being blamed for the defeat, according to The Tennessean: muddled messaging and the choice of a typically low-turnout election for the vote.

The newspaper editorialized that “there obviously was not enough listening done during the process. There was confusion among voters who thought this plan should have fixed congestion. There was resistance to the type and level of new taxation.”

Opponents of the measure argued against the viability and high cost of light rail. They also focused on a proposed 1-cent increase to the local sales tax that would have tied Nashville with Chicago for the highest sales tax rate in the country.

As Jeff Davis of the Eno Center for Transportation notes in his typically detailed and informative analysis this week “Tennessee is one of those states that runs a debt-free state transportation program and discourages municipal-level debt. Less borrowing means more money is needed up front. Because of this, comparatively speaking, the program just rejected by voters proposed a fairly
high level of immediate self-sacrifice by the taxpayers of Davidson County.”

Another disagreement over the transit plan, according to Nashville Public Radio [9], involved how it would impact development along proposed light rail and bus rapid transit corridors and if it would intensify the gentrification already taking place.

Where Nashville Goes from Here

Supporters of the transit plan said gearing up for another try could take a while.

“It took us five years to get to this point where we are today, and it’s going to take us five to 10 years to get back to this point,” said Kelly Brockman, spokeswoman for Transit for Nashville, the pro-transit campaign, according to The Tennessean [10]. “And it’s going to cost a lot more money.”

The state legislation that made the transit referendum possible, 2017’s IMPROVE Act, says cities have to wait at least one year to hold another transit vote. But Metro Councilman John Cooper, an opponent of the transit plan, has suggested a scaled-down proposal that would raise the sales tax by half a percent could be put in front of voters as soon as August or November of this year.

Some advocates called for any future transit plan to be smaller, to focus less on light rail and more on buses, sidewalks and affordable housing and to draw on the ideas of nonprofit groups rather than the big business interests that drove this transit effort, Streetsblog USA reported [11].

For his part, Briley, the Mayor, said he intends to push forward with improvements to the city’s bus system.

“I can tell you that we’re not waiting for a referendum to work on transit,” Briley told Nashville Public Radio [12]. “We’re already starting to think about what the next steps are going to be, with or without a referendum.”

In his State of Metro Address [13] Friday, Briley emphasized the work ahead “Make no mistake: Any successful plan will require some sacrifice and some collaboration among people who don’t always agree.”

Briley, the former Vice Mayor, is one of a dozen candidates running in a special election May 24 to serve out the remainder of former Mayor Megan Barry’s term and put his political capital on the line to support the plan. His opponents, all of whom opposed the transit plan, all also concede that traffic congestion is an issue that must be addressed with transit as part of the solution.

But some in the state have very different ideas for how Nashville should combat its traffic issues. Diane Black, who represents Tennessee’s 6th congressional district and is a Republican gubernatorial candidate, has called the transit plan a “big government boondoggle” and this week suggested double-stacked interstates through downtown Nashville and the completion of Interstate 840 should be the keys to traffic relief rather than investments in mass transit, The Tennessean [14]reported [14].

Economic Impacts of the Transit Vote

Analysts said the impact of the transit defeat could be to slow the expansion of large companies to the city and to cause a damaging blow to how Nashville is perceived by the business world, when compared with peer cities with better transit systems like Charlotte and Atlanta.

It could also be the death knell for the city’s bid for Amazon’s second headquarters [15], some feared
Music City made the cut of 20 finalists for HQ2 earlier this year but Amazon has highlighted transit among the priorities its looking for in a second home.

Several Middle Tennessee firms invested significantly in the transit push and the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce was one of the plan’s biggest proponents.

“For a lot of business leaders the transit proposal was a very positive thing,” Lipscomb University business professor Andy Borchers told The Tennessean. “They were thinking in terms of their employees being able to get to work, about general development of the community. There will be a number of business leaders who will have to rethink some things about their business.”

What It Means for Other States, Communities

Transit advocates in Austin, Texas said they see a kindred spirit in Nashville, the Austin Business Journal reported. For some, the defeat of the Nashville referendum brought back a lesson learned in 2014 when a light-rail proposal went down to defeat in Austin: the importance of building a solid base for any proposal. Another ballot push for transit funding could be on the horizon for Austin in 2020 as part of Project Connect, the Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s long-term infrastructure plan.

Voters in another Texas city could have an opportunity even sooner than that to determine the fate of a transit plan, according to the Houston Chronicle. A long-term plan for bus and rail service is expected to be considered in Houston in 2019, when the city will also elect a mayor.

Some are quick to point out that the failure of a big transit plan like the one in Nashville doesn’t mean a community can’t have later success. Art Guzzetti, vice president of policy for the American Public Transportation Association, tells Governing magazine this week that many eventually successful light rail systems got their start with ambitious ballot proposals. The cities of Dallas, Denver, Phoenix and Salt Lake City all faced initial setbacks before they won approval to build their transit networks. Guzzetti also noted that cities like Atlanta have seen later success by rethinking who they’re asking for support and seeking to better align who is taxed and who benefits in a region.

Further Reading on Nashville Transit

- “Nashville’s next transit referendum must focus on mobility, not development,” Mobility Lab, May 3, 2018.
- “Nashville’s Transit Fight Just Got Weird,” City Lab, April 27, 2018.

More State Updates on Public Transit

- **Florida:** Transit planners in the Tampa Bay area are looking at bus rapid transit rather than light rail to meet transit needs and improve the region’s traffic woes, reports WJCT. Tampa Bay is the largest metro area in the country without any kind of local passenger rail service.
- **Georgia:** Gov. Nathan Deal last week signed legislation that could pave the way for the biggest expansion of mass transit in metro Atlanta in a generation, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported. House Bill 930 creates a new board to coordinate transit funding and construction across the region and allows 13 metro Atlanta counties to raise sales taxes to pay for transit expansions. There is more about the transit plan and its potential impact here and here.
- **Indiana:** Indianapolis is set to receive a $75 million federal grant for a 13-mile, $96 million bus rapid transit project after the project was put on hold for months, the Indianapolis Star reported.
The grant money comes from the Federal Transit Administration’s Small Starts program, which President Trump has sought to kill.

- **Michigan:** A proposal to fund a regional transit plan for southeast Michigan could be on the ballot this year but State Rep. Jeff Yaroch has introduced legislation that would allow cities, villages and townships to opt out of a vote to authorize a millage tax, according to the Detroit Free Press.[32] A millage request by the Regional Transit Authority in 2016 narrowly failed in Macomb and Oakland counties (metro Detroit) and county executives are said to oppose the latest RTA proposal. A recent op-ed[33] penned by officials from four metro Detroit hospitals argued that a lack of transit in the area is a public health issue.

- **Minnesota:** Streetsblog USA reported[34] last month on how the Twin Cities figured out how to increase bus ridership on its A Line. Riders can board at any door, peak service runs at least every 10 minutes, there are stops every half-mile along the 10-mile route and traffic signals hold green lights for buses. Ridership has reportedly increased 30 percent since the upgrades were completed two years ago at a cost of $27 million.

- **New Hampshire:** A 10-year highway plan approved by the state Senate last week does not include a provision to use federal funding for a study of commuter rail linking Manchester and Nashua to Boston, according to WMUR[35].

- **New Jersey:** Gov. Phil Murphy announced last month that more bus drivers will be hired and additional buses will be added to overcrowded routes in North Jersey thanks to a $242 million increase in state funding for NJ Transit, according to northjersey.com[36]. But it was also announced recently[37] that NJ Transit plans to discontinue some train routes through the beginning of next year to allow the agency to catch up on installation of positive train control equipment.

- **New York:** New York City’s Metropolitan Transportation Authority recently announced a plan to upgrade and modernize the city’s struggling bus system, according to the New York Times[38]. A full-redesign of bus routes, all-door boarding, double-decker buses, digital signage and perhaps bus rapid transit lanes could be on the horizon to revive the system, which has been plagued by sluggish service and declining ridership. The city’s transportation commissioner Polly Trottenberg expressed enthusiasm for the plan’s proposals, many of which would require cooperation from the city. Mayor Bill de Blasio has offered his own bus initiative. ... The MTA also recently approved an amendment to its capital plan that will allocate at least $600 million for Americans with Disabilities Act accessibility projects, according to Crain’s New York Business[40].

- **Virginia:** A multiyear project to reconstruct 20 Metro station platforms, address structural deficiencies and improve passenger safety will result in a 2019 shutdown of all Blue and Yellow Line Metro stations south of Reagan National Airport between Memorial Day and Labor Day, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority announced this week[41]. ... WTOP Radio reported recently[42] on how toll revenues from I-66 inside the Capital Beltway this year will help fund new express bus service to the Pentagon, on-demand shuttles to park-and-ride lots in Prince William County, better bike parking in Manassas and a campaign to get more people to carpool or take transit.

- **Washington:** The board of directors of Seattle’s Sound Transit approved a new policy last month that requires the transit agency to offer 80 percent of any surplus property surrounding Link Light Rail stations for affordable housing projects. Seattle Weekly[43] and Public Square[44] have more on the policy.

**Further Reading on Public Transit**

come known for its transit upgrades of recent years, many of which were made possible by a voter-approved 2004 sales tax increase. The city also has made innovative use of public-private partnerships on projects like the renovation of Denver Union Station and the Great Hall Redevelopment at Denver International Airport. Denver's Mayor Michael B. Hancock will deliver a keynote address at the US P3 Infrastructure Forum 2018 hosted by Inframation. CSG is pleased to be a supporting organization and media partner this year on the conference, which takes place June 13-14 at The Hilton Midtown in New York City. The preliminary agenda for the 14th annual event is now available and you can request your copy here. The Infrastructure Forum brings together state and federal public officials and regional transportation authorities, along with infrastructure developers, investors and financiers to talk about what’s happening with public-private partnerships around the country and the issues that are shaping the industry’s future. You can find out more about how to register for the conference on the event website. I’ll also have more details about the event here on the CSG Knowledge Center in the weeks ahead. For an idea of what to expect, you can read my coverage of the 2016 forum here. And for more on Denver’s transportation history, check out this archived post from 2015.