

THE COMMUNITY ISSUES FORUM FOCUSES ON IMPROVING THE BUS SYSTEM WITH ISSUE 7

(by Bill Woods for StreetVibes)

A tax levy to improve bus service in Cincinnati and Hamilton County will confront voters in the upcoming primary election. At the Community Issues Forum at Christ Church Cathedral on January 23rd, Pete Metz, Manager of Transportation Initiatives for the Cincinnati Regional Chamber of Commerce, made the case for why this levy is so badly needed. After years of neglect, this proposal would, according to Metz, provide enough new revenue to make the current system more rider friendly while extending services throughout Hamilton County.



A consensus exists among public transit planners and users that the current Queen City Metro bus system administered by SORTA is inadequate. Bus services and funding have needed a boost for years, and SORTA regularly faces fiscal problems. Consequently in the last ten years, METRO increased bus fares while reducing services and bus routes. As could be expected as a result of these measures, ridership has dropped. The Better Bus Coalition, comprised primarily of bus users,

has effectively portrayed these inadequacies, and it's leaders have regularly put forward plans for improving the system.

One major problem of the current system that was depicted by Better Bus Coalition leaders Cam Hardy and Mark Sanaan at a 2019 Community Issues Forum is the lack of bus services that go beyond Cincinnati's municipal boundaries. Few bus routes into Hamilton County now exist, and this fact prevents many unemployed and underemployed Cincinnati residents from connecting to available jobs in the suburbs. Providing better bus connections from the City to the County, according to Sanaan and Hardy, would help reduce the number of individuals and families in dire economic straits.

What would the proposed tax levy accomplish? First of all, Issue 7 on the primary ballot would raise revenue from a .8-percent County sales tax. Pete Metz explained that this tax would bring in approximately \$130-million a year, and it would replace a City of Cincinnati earnings tax that currently funds SORTA. Last November, Cincinnati residents voted that this special earnings tax earmarked for Metro bus services would end if Issue 7 won approval this March.

Pete Metz then described the plan for new services and improvements if voters give a green light to Issue 7. First of all, noted Metz, eight new bus routes would be established. Many of these crosstown routes would better connect the City and Hamilton County, and bus riders would have access to 20,000 jobs that are now inaccessible. Furthermore, the plan calls for transit corridors that would speed up bus trips.

The plan also calls for more frequent buses on twenty-six routes. Buses along these routes would be available every twenty minutes, while on major routes the wait time will be even less. Six routes will have 24-hour service, and riders will have access to more weekend service than

now exists. Metz finally called attention to money in the plan that will be used for road and bridge infrastructure improvements.

In the question and answer period, Metz received some thoughtful responses. One attendee questioned an over dependence on buses, and whether the levy would raise enough revenue to allow for long range planning for new transportation technology. The speaker acknowledged this need, and said that money would have to be put aside for developing the public transit of the future. He responded that no money from the levy would go to the streetcar, and that SORTA no longer had any responsibility for this entity. On an optimistic note, Metz concluded that Issue 7 faced no official opposition at this juncture of the campaign, and that many organizations including the Better Bus Coalition were actively campaigning for its passage.