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**Swap transit tax for roads tax? State pols scoff**

MARY NEWSOM

I've heard people toss off the suggestion as if it's as easy as flipping the radio from FM to AM:

Kill the sales tax that pays for light rail, they say. Then get a sales tax to build more roads.

You'll probably hear that more and more in the next five months, since there's officially going to be a Nov. 6 referendum on keeping the transit sales tax.

Don't believe it. You don't just "get a sales tax" the way you "get a quart of milk" at the store. Any N.C. county that wants a sales tax for its own purposes must get the N.C. General Assembly's OK.

And if you pay attention to the legislature -- many people in Mecklenburg don't -- you know legislators are stingy with permission for local sales taxes.

Mecklenburg was allowed to hold its 1998 referendum on adding a half-cent sales tax here only after months and months of hard lobbying.

**'That dog won't hunt'**

I wanted a reality check on this idea that we can kill one tax and easily snag another. I figured opinions from local legislators -- whether pro- or anti-transit -- would be pooh-poohed by people here who are on the other side of the issue. So I called only non-Mecklenburgers, both Republicans and Democrats. A Mecklenburg sales tax for roads? "That dog won't hunt," said Sen. David Hoyle, D-Gaston, co-chair of the Senate Finance Committee.

Rep. Debbie Clary, R-Cleveland: "Highly unrealistic. Highly improbable."

Rep. Paul Luebke, D-Durham, senior chairman of the House Finance Committee: "A sales tax for highways? Very difficult."

Sen. Fletcher Hartsell, R-Cabarrus, vice chair of the Senate Finance Committee: "Once you repeal something, replacing it is not automatic."

I interviewed them separately. All gave virtually identical assessments of the chance of passing a Mecklenburg sales tax for roads: Not quite the proverbial snowball in hell but about like a snowball in, say, April. It would theoretically have a chance if some unlikely things happen.

It's important to say most Mecklenburg elected officials, whether pro- or anti-transit tax, aren't saying snagging a new sales tax is simple. Most (not all) know better.

And most officials here understand that N.C. counties aren't allowed to build roads. We have no "county roads." Cities and states build the roads. So enacting a county sales tax for roads would be tricky even if legislators embraced the idea.

Most voters, though, know little about who funds what. If they want to kill the transit tax they should vote to do so. But they shouldn't do it thinking a sales tax for roads would follow easily.

Why won't legislators just let counties raise sales taxes?

"The sales tax *belongs* to the state. The state *gives* it to communities," Hoyle said. "If we (the state) need revenue ... where would we go get it?"

Or as Hartsell explained it, "The property tax is local. The sales tax is state. There are a number of people here ... who essentially feel that."

**Sales tax isn't an easy sell**

Legislators see a state in which many, many counties -- not just Mecklenburg -- struggle to pay for needs such as roads, schools and Medicaid. Why give something to Mecklenburg alone?

In addition, Luebke said, "The state only wants to go so high on sales taxes." Plus, he's one of a number of Democrats who see the sales tax as regressive, disproportionately hurting low-income families.

Further, House Republicans were more centrist in the late 1990s, he said, while now, as a group, they're more solidly against raising any taxes.

Clary voted to let Mecklenburg hold its 1998 referendum. She said she thinks Charlotte needs transit options. I mentioned some other tax ideas I've heard people here mention: A special gas tax for Mecklenburg roads. "Absolutely not." A transportation impact fee. "Not going to happen."

She and the others also said legislators would be inclined to hold it against Mecklenburg if it had a tax, scrapped it, and then sought another.

"Those things just do not float through the legislature magically," she said.

Sometime in the next five months, you may hear someone propose swapping our transit tax for one that pays for roads. Do not believe that person knows which end is up.

URBAN OUTLOOK Mary

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