

## Success at the Ballot Box

Ballot initiatives seeking voter approval to raise money for transportation have twice the success rate of ballot measures generally. Since 2000, nearly 500 transportation funding measures have appeared on ballots nationwide, and 71 percent have been approved. Year after year, voters in both liberal and conservative communities, prove at the ballot box that they understand the importance of infrastructure investment.

The vast majority of those measures ask voters to direct their tax dollars towards transportation investment. These measures run the gamut from property tax levies in small Michigan townships that bring in just over six figures annually to a 30-year sales tax increase in Los Angeles County projected to generate \$40 billion. Property and sales taxes are by far the most common method of ballot-box financing, but bonds, vehicle fees, and other innovative tax mechanisms are also used with success. Often, these sources of dedicated local funding are the linchpin for securing state and federal capital grants.

### Hallmarks of Successful Ballot Measures

Across all types of communities and financing methods, winning transportation measures are united by certain hallmarks of success:

**Building the reputation of the implementing agencies:** Voters are inclined to vote for transportation initiatives if they believe the agency responsible is capable of doing a good job. In 2007, a sales tax measure in **Salt Lake City** sponsored by the Utah Transit Authority (UTA) passed with a two-thirds majority even though specifics of the measure were not worked out until six weeks before Election Day. One key to success was that the agency had put great effort into maintaining a strong, positive public reputation prior to launching the campaign. TV ads were already regularly appearing reminding the public of the benefits of the service provided by UTA. When it came time to initiate the electoral campaign, early outreach efforts had already paved the way.



*Salt Lake City's light rail, bus and commuter rail systems have been expanded with funding from a 2007 voter-approved sales tax, which won by a two-thirds majority*

Early polling and fundraising are crucial to ensuring a successful campaign. Early fundraising allows for a more robust campaign and can be used to engage in pre-campaign educational activities. Early polling reveals not only where voters stand, but also what messages will resonate. **Clark County, WA**, ran a successful sales tax campaign in 2011, the same year neighboring county Pierce lost a similar measure. One of the key differences for Clark County was early polling. Coalition leaders took this information to the County Board to aid elected officials in developing the right plan.

**Tout specific benefits:** When voters understand the transportation and economic benefits they will receive, they are much more likely to support a tax measure. Both the language of the measure itself and the messaging of the campaign need to make those clear. Officials in **Grand Rapids, MI**, discovered this in 2009 when they lost a measure that would have invested in bus rapid transit serving only half of the communities in the service area. After the loss, the transit agency formed the “Mobile Metro 2030 Task

Force” to develop a transit master plan that would bring a specific set of outcomes to the broadest possible swath of voters. A subsequent ballot measure passed in 2011.

**Strong champion(s):** Successful ballot measures usually benefit from the support of prominent public figures, whether elected officials, sports figures, academics or business leaders. They help put a face to the issue and draw media attention to the cause.

When a repeal of the transit sales tax in **Charlotte, NC**, went on the ballot in November 2007, the president of the Carolina Panthers appeared with a player in a commercial asking for a vote against the repeal. In another ad, two popular former mayors from opposing political parties appeared in an ad where they “secretly” admitted to agreeing on the same issue—namely that a vote against repeal was important for the community.

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This is adapted from “Thinking Outside the Farebox: Creative Approaches to Financing Transit Projects”, available for free from Transportation for America at <http://t4america.org/maps-tools/transit-guidebook/>



*Voters in Baton Rouge approved a regional sales tax to nearly double the dedicated revenue for their struggling bus system*