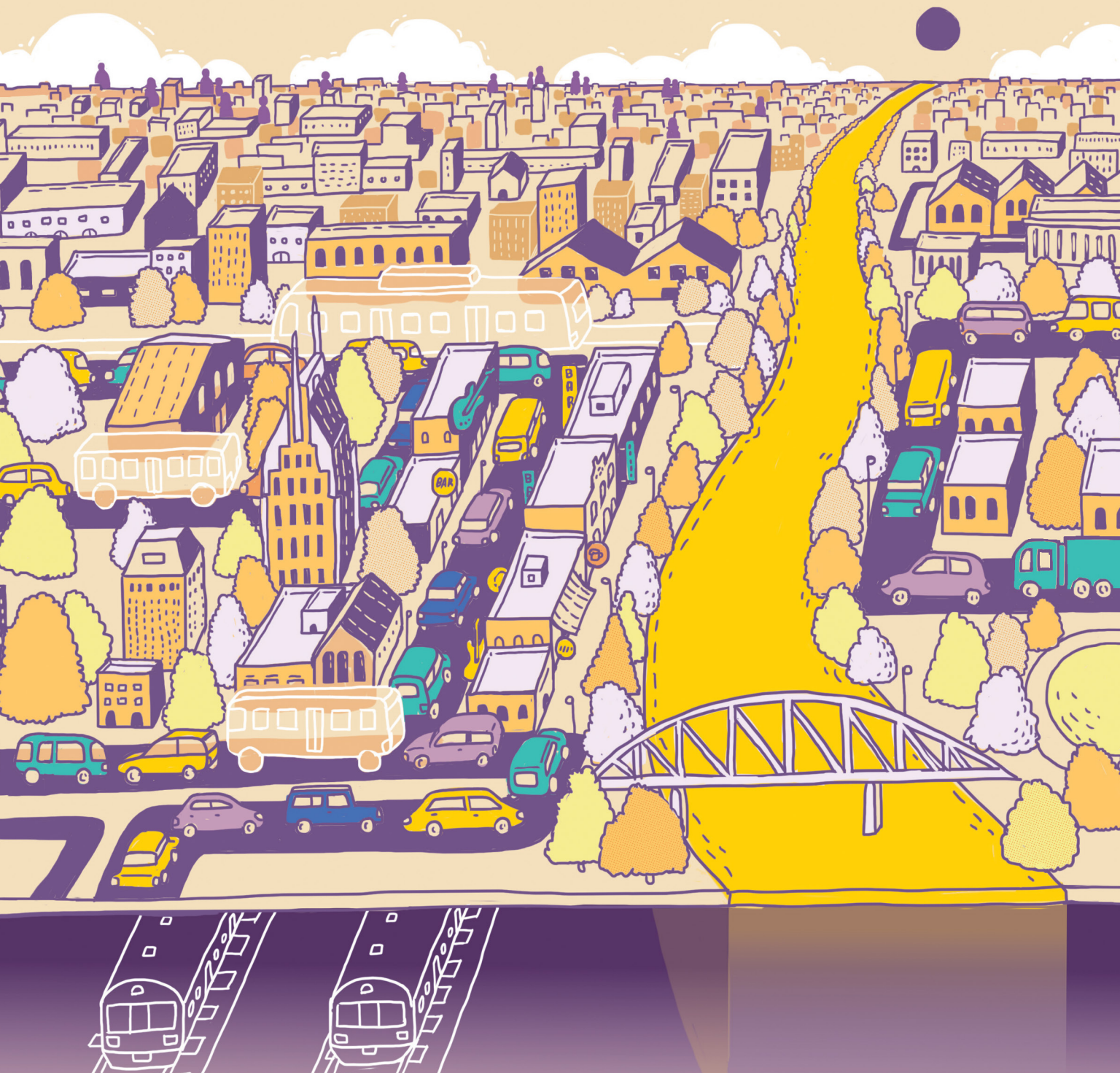


Derailed

How Nashville's Ambitious Transit Plan Crashed at the Polls—
And What Other Cities Can Learn From It



TransitCenter

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TransitCenter works to improve public transit in ways that make cities more just, environmentally sustainable, and economically vibrant. We believe that fresh thinking can change the transportation landscape and improve the overall livability of cities. We commission and conduct research, convene events, and produce publications that inform and improve public transit and urban transportation. For more information, please visit www.transitcenter.org.

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Contents

| | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| Executive Summary | 4 |
| Background: Transit Challenges for the "It" City | 16 |
| Moving Fast: A Hasty, Secretive Planning Process | 22 |
| The Planning Process, in Retrospect | 34 |
| Money Without Strength: The Pro-Transit Campaign Stumbles to the Finish Line | 40 |
| The Campaign, in Retrospect | 52 |
| Conclusion | 60 |
| Epilogue: What Comes Next for Nashville Transit? | 62 |
| Appendix: Timeline | 64 |

Executive Summary

In 2018, an ambitious plan to expand Nashville's public transportation system crashed at the polls. The story of how the campaign came apart is relevant far beyond the Music City. Transit in Nashville faces challenges similar to those in other American cities, particularly across the Sunbelt. Nashville's streets have been engineered and designed to prioritize cars at the expense of walking, biking, and transit. After decades of sprawling land-use development, population and job densities in many areas are too low to support high-quality transit.



With rapid growth and booming downtown tourism, “traffic” ascended to the top of residents’ list of concerns in 2017, edging out affordable housing and education.

A legacy of discrimination in housing and transportation policy has segregated the city’s neighborhoods. Public transit is chronically underfunded, and the prospects for long-term financial resources from the State of Tennessee are slim.

Transit referendums can be among cities’ most powerful tools to overcome these challenges. And while it is rarely easy to win a transit referendum, cities, counties, and regions across the country have succeeded.¹ Yours can, too—but you should take care to learn not only from those successes but from the setbacks.

Take Metro Nashville, a consolidated city-county government of nearly 700,000 residents, the capital of Tennessee, and one of the fastest-growing metro areas in the nation. With rapid growth and booming downtown tourism, “traffic” ascended to the top of residents’ list of concerns in 2017, edging out affordable housing and education. Yet the following year, proponents of public transportation lost a transit funding vote by large margins.

Local leaders had long recognized the region’s growing transportation challenges. Following then-Mayor Karl Dean’s withdrawal of a controversial rapid bus line in early 2015, the Nashville Metropolitan Transit Authority (since rebranded as WeGo Transit) repurposed federal grant funding to perform a comprehensive planning process dubbed *nMotion*. The *nMotion* process included more than a year of public meetings, surveys, and technical analysis, and generated a regional transportation plan, published in 2016, that continues to inform WeGo Transit’s priorities.²

Nashvillians elected Megan Barry as the city’s first female mayor in late 2015. Barry made transit her administration’s highest priority, working with the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce, state legislators, and others to enact legislation (the IMPROVE Act) that would allow Nashville and several other Tennessee cities and counties to run ballot measures proposing tax increases to fund public transit.

Immediately after the IMPROVE Act’s passage in May 2017, the Barry administration conducted an internal four-month planning process to choose projects for a ballot measure. This planning process culminated in the launch of the Transit for Nashville coalition in September 2017—formed to support a referendum—and subsequent release of the *Let’s Move Nashville* plan in October. At this time Mayor Barry was overwhelmingly popular, and polling suggested that raising taxes to fund transit expansion had majority support in Metro Nashville.

Parallel to the mayor’s planning process, the chamber of commerce laid the groundwork for the Transit for Nashville campaign, hiring consultants and signing off on the campaign’s overall strategy.

1 Robert Puentes, *Transportation at the Ballot Box: 2018* (Washington, DC: Eno Center for Transportation, 2018), https://www.enotrans.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Transportation_at_the_Ballot_Box_2018_11-5-18.pdf?x43122

2 Nashville Metropolitan Transit Authority and the Regional Transportation Authority of Middle Tennessee, *2016 nMotion Transit Plan*, https://www.nmotion.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/MTA_Recommended_Plan_9.21.pdf



The campaign strategy depended on African American support, but the mayor's office alienated African American voters repeatedly during the year leading up to the election.

The campaign launched in a charged political atmosphere. Nashville's rapid growth had bred resentment around many of the local dynamics that accompany growth—more expensive housing, widespread construction, slower traffic, significant in-migration. Meanwhile, the heightened national focus on issues of social and racial justice had changed local political dynamics in ways that Nashville leaders did not anticipate. Combined with declining transit ridership in Nashville and beyond, the ground was fertile for bad-faith critiques from conservative think tanks and so-called “experts.”

Mayor Barry was the public face of the Transit for Nashville campaign until she and one of her bodyguards came under scrutiny for the misuse of public funds in January 2018. The timing could not have been worse: the opposition campaign, NoTax4Tracks, launched almost simultaneously with a focus on eroding trust in the *Let's Move Nashville* plan among African American voters and tax-skeptics. The mayor resigned less than six weeks later, jeopardizing the referendum's chances of success and throwing the Transit for Nashville campaign into disarray.

On May 1, 2018, the *Let's Move Nashville* transit funding referendum failed by the spectacular margin of 36 percent “for” to 64 “against.”

Signs did not point to such a lopsided defeat. When polled in the months leading up to the vote, more than 70 percent of Nashvillians claimed to support tax increases to fund transit. The “for” campaign out-fundraised the “against” campaign by roughly a factor of three, with more than a six-month head start. The political campaign, backed by the mayor's office and the chamber of commerce, made data-driven decisions at each step of the process.

News coverage of the vote cited Mayor Barry's resignation, an anonymously funded opposition campaign, and the get-out-the-vote effort by the local chapter of the Koch brothers-funded Americans for Prosperity. But a 64-36 margin is large enough to suggest that several other factors were at play.

So, what happened?

There were three major missteps.

First, insularity.

In the referendum planning process, Mayor Barry and her planning team assumed they knew what their constituents would vote for based on the existing *nMotion* long-range plan, without stress-testing the referendum plan with either residents or community leaders before its release. In developing the campaign's political strategy, campaign staff ignored or failed to seek out both stakeholder and expert input. The coalition appointed co-chairs who led the effort in name only. Though they represented key constituencies and were authentic spokespeople, they were not empowered to make decisions or influence strategy. The campaign's strong, direct ties to the mayor caused the campaign to lose its footing when the mayor's scandal hit.

3 Office of the Mayor, Megan Barry, *Housing Nashville: Nashville & Davidson County's Housing Report* (2017), <https://www.nashville.gov/Portals/0/SiteContent/MayorsOffice/AffordableHousing/Housing%20Nashville%20FINAL.pdf>

4 Amie Thurber et al., *Equitable Development: Promising Practices to Maximize Affordability and Minimize Displacement in Nashville's Urban Core* (NashvilleNext, 2014), https://www.nashville.gov/Portals/0/SiteContent/Planning/docs/NashvilleNext/BackgroundReports/Housing_Gentrification_EquitableDevelopment_report.pdf

5 Nashville Metropolitan Transit Authority and the Regional Transportation Authority of Middle Tennessee, *nMotion Final Community Engagement Report: January–July 2016*, https://nmotion.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/nMotion-Community-Engagement-Report_Final.pdf

Second, an inconsistent strategy.

The campaign strategy depended on African American support, but the mayor's office alienated African American voters repeatedly during the year leading up to the election. Growing concerns about gentrification and displacement—and the mayor's housing plan³—highlighted the region's affordable housing shortage. Housing advocates were dissatisfied with the city government's track record of implementing plans to increase and preserve affordable housing stock,⁴ and advocates felt the mayor's efforts to align housing policy with the transit referendum were too little, too late. When the Transit for Nashville campaign failed to focus on African American voices in its outreach, organizing structure, and messaging, a strong, targeted opposition campaign filled the void. These dynamics undermined Transit for Nashville's equity-focused arguments.

Third, haste.

With only eleven months between the passage of the IMPROVE Act and a public vote, the mayor's office prioritized speed. This urgency came at the expense of robust public engagement, with the mayor's office in effect assuming that the Nashville MTA's *nMotion* public outreach process⁵ had been sufficient. Participants in that process were not, however, representative of Nashville's voting population, and people of color were significantly underrepresented. Those who participated in *nMotion* surveys weighed in on Nashville MTA's long-range plan, but not on the specific projects they would be willing to pay for via specific tax increases. Lack of public engagement exacerbated the campaign's insularity.



These factors combined to erode already fragile trust in government across the May 2018 electorate. Early strategic decisions by the mayor’s office merit particular scrutiny, because the consequences reverberated during the planning process and the political campaign. Decisions about whom to consult, which goals to strive for, and when and where to hold the election shaped the plan and the campaign’s ability to earn “yes” votes.

Most strategic oversights were rooted in one flawed assumption: the decision-makers in both groups thought they understood what Nashville’s communities wanted. While the mayor’s office trusted the *nMotion* recommendations on light rail, the *Let’s Move Nashville* plan called for funding less than 20 percent of the bus service recommended by *nMotion*. Both the mayor’s office and the Transit for Nashville campaign based strategic decisions on voter modeling and polling, but often at the expense of allies’ and staff members’ subject-matter expertise. Planning and campaign team leaders were more out of touch with Nashville voters than they realized, in large part because they relied too heavily on engagement with “grasstops” leaders.

Sound transit planning sits at the intersection of political savvy, technical expertise, and a genuine understanding of what residents and transit riders need. Seeking such understanding can be hard work, but the success of future referendums depends on it.

This case study, *Derailed*, identifies key lessons for elected officials, agency leaders, and transit advocates drawn from Nashville’s experience. The material is synthesized from more than forty interviews with stakeholders across the spectrum of involvement in the *Let’s Move Nashville* planning process and referendum—including Mayor Barry’s planning team, the political campaign, coalition members, paid and volunteer advocates on both sides of the issue, journalists, and elected officials.

Transportation Planning and Ballot Measure Design

With the best intentions, Mayor Barry and her planning team made several early strategic decisions in haste, potentially at great cost to the ultimate referendum results.

For starters, Mayor Barry’s planning effort was guided by a group of trusted advisors and appointed officials whose relatively homogeneous worldview was out of step with the priorities of Nashville voters. The plan they developed drew heavily from the Nashville MTA’s *nMotion* long-range plan, which recommended mainly investing in light rail. The Nashville MTA’s *nMotion* public engagement report found that

Timeline



2015

April

After the failure of the “Amp” rapid bus project, a priority of Mayor Karl Dean, the Nashville MTA kicks off nMotion 2015, a regional strategic planning process. The Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce announces a parallel Moving Forward effort, led by regional business leaders, designed to influence the MTA process.

September

Megan Barry is elected mayor of Nashville.

2016

January

Nashville MTA unveils three nMotion scenarios to guide the city’s future transit investments. The largest is focused on light rail, with additional investments in bus rapid transit, local bus improvements, and other rail options, and has a \$5.4 billion price tag.

September

The Nashville MTA adopts the most ambitious nMotion scenario.



2017

April

Governor Bill Haslam signs into law the IMPROVE Act, which increases the gas tax and allows Nashville (as well as other counties and cities) to raise dedicated funding for future transit projects through referendums.

October

Mayor Barry announces her proposed transit investment plan for Davidson County, called Let’s Move Nashville.

December

Mayor Barry formally files legislation to trigger a May referendum to raise the local sales tax and three other taxes in order to fund expanded public transit.

2018

March

Mayor Barry resigns.

May

Election Day. By a 64-36 margin, Nashville voters reject the tax increase.



current transit riders were the least likely to support this plan (preferring a greater emphasis on bus improvements),⁶ suggesting that this recommendation stood on shakier ground than the mayor and her advisors realized.

Mayor Barry wanted to move through the referendum process as quickly as possible, and the planning team wanted to carefully control the plan's messaging and release following the long, drawn-out defeat of a previous Nashville transit project. For these reasons, the mayor's staff conducted financing and engineering work behind closed doors. The absence of meaningful public engagement would go on to breed resentment and dampen support for the plan among would-be allies, opening the door for transit opponents to more credibly offer bad-faith critiques.

The referendum planning process requires civic leaders to seek the right balance between navigating the local political landscape and prioritizing meaningful transit improvements.

Navigating the local political landscape:

Act with appropriate urgency

- Mayor Barry ensured progress by convening key advisors and senior staff, giving them a mandate to bring something ambitious to voters, and setting similarly ambitious deadlines. But this time pressure also forced the Barry administration to make decisions in haste, contributing to strategic choices, e.g., a plan dominated by light rail investment, that in retrospect appear misguided.

6 Nashville Metropolitan Transit Authority and the Regional Transportation Authority of Middle Tennessee, *nMotion Final Community Engagement Report: January–July 2016*, https://nmotion.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/nMotion-Community-Engagement-Report_Final.pdf

While the Barry administration as a whole was quite diverse, the team that designed the *Let's Move Nashville* plan included no people of color with decision-making power.

Include and foreground a diverse range of voices in the decision-making process

- While the Barry administration as a whole was quite diverse, the team that designed the *Let's Move Nashville* plan included no people of color with decision-making power.

Build your plan on a foundation of inclusive, meaningful public outreach

- The absence of public engagement made it impossible for Mayor Barry's team to gauge how their proposal would be received by voters. Instead, the planning team worked behind closed doors, relying on the *nMotion* plan, which drew from surveys that dramatically underrepresented people of color.

Choose an election and a geographic scope that will maximize your likelihood of success

- Under Tennessee's IMPROVE Act, Metro Nashville can only run county-wide transit ballot measures. While the county as a whole is fairly progressive, land use outside central Nashville is not transit-supportive, creating unavoidable political challenges.
- The mayor decided to put this initiative on the ballot at a May 2018 election based on modelling and polling analysis, but this decision created significant uncertainty regarding turnout and allowed opponents to focus exclusively on transit (as opposed to the state or federal races that would have drawn attention in a November election). Modelling suggested there would be high African American voter turnout in this election, but both the mayor's office and the Transit for Nashville campaign failed to prioritize engagement and outreach in African American communities.

Prioritizing meaningful transportation access improvements:

Make improving access to high-quality transit the North Star of your planning process

- Although everyone on the mayor's team wanted to improve transportation access, the final package emphasized light rail projects rather than focusing on bus service improvements, which would have delivered greater access to frequent transit at a lower cost to residents.

Place equity at the heart of the transportation plan

- Transit investments can advance equity in a variety of ways, but the lack of public engagement and perceived over-emphasis on light rail—especially given concerns about housing affordability, gentrification, and displacement—eroded public trust, particularly among Nashvillians of color.

To develop and execute a successful campaign plan, civic leaders need to build strategic, flexible campaign structures that reflect the diversity of the voter base and work with community partners to deliver clear, consistent messages to voters.

Political Campaign Strategy

The Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce played a critical role in the referendum organizing effort. The chamber maintained strong relationships with the mayor's office, funded study trips to other cities with major transit investments, and conducted multiple studies to lay the groundwork for what would become the *Let's Move Nashville* plan. The chamber led a successful fundraising effort, hired the campaign consultants who managed the Transit for Nashville political campaign on a day-to-day basis, founded the Transit for Nashville coalition, and drew 136 organizations into that coalition.

In retrospect, however, the chamber's role in Transit for Nashville was too dominant—without more diverse perspectives in the decision-making process, the chamber's organizational mission to represent the business community created blind spots that weakened the campaign. The chamber failed to create space for other groups to lead.

To develop and execute a successful campaign plan, civic leaders need to build strategic, flexible campaign structures that reflect the diversity of the voter base and work with community partners to deliver clear, consistent messages to voters.

Build strategic, flexible campaign structures that reflect the diversity of the voter base:

Align campaign organizing and leadership structure with strategic goals

- The Transit for Nashville campaign's leadership structure was muddled and lacked clear accountability, with the lead campaign consultant and campaign manager hired separately. Staff at the lead PR agency for the campaign were also mostly part-time, which meant that, especially during Mayor Barry's scandal, their attention was divided.
- In retrospect, the chamber regretted not including stronger financial incentives in their consultant contract—both to reduce budget overruns and to add a direct financial incentive to win.

Include and foreground a diverse range of voices in the decision-making process

- There were no African American people in decision-making roles on the Transit for Nashville campaign, and campaign consultants charged with outreach to communities of color often felt their concerns and ideas were ignored.

Build flexibility into your campaign so you can adapt to changing circumstances



- The Transit for Nashville campaign stuck to a rigid plan, even as circumstances rapidly changed. The campaign's unwillingness to incorporate new information coming from consultants conducting outreach in African American and Latinx neighborhoods, for example, diminished staff morale and limited the ability to adapt.

Anticipate an organized opposition

- Many of the opposition campaign's strategies and messages were designed to mislead. Most of these messages were not new,⁷ but Transit for Nashville did not anticipate the opposition's tactics. Scrappy, strategically targeted opposition assisted by local Koch-funded groups and conservative think tanks is increasingly common in transit referendums.⁸

Work with community partners to deliver clear, consistent messages to voters:

Build an independent and inclusive transit advocacy coalition

- The Transit for Nashville coalition looked broad on paper but was shallow in practice—organizational leaders were on board, but not necessarily their employees or staff. This was partly because the coalition was managed by the political campaign, rather than by coalition members. Coalition members' responsibilities were at times unclear, and the most active members had limited experience working together.

Don't take key constituencies for granted

- The May 2018 election was chosen in large part because it typically sees higher African American turnout than other elections in Nashville (nearly 30 percent of Nashvillians are African American). Yet the opposition campaign dramatically outperformed Transit for Nashville in building trust in African American communities, even with significantly fewer resources, because they identified a compelling spokesperson and targeted their campaign investments accordingly.

Build a diverse bench of spokespeople

- Mayor Barry's resignation put into stark relief how dependent the transit campaign had been on her popularity to carry the referendum forward. Without a bench of empowered, trusted spokespeople, the campaign scrambled and failed to find viable replacements.

Define the narrative with consistent messages that clearly convey the plan's likely benefits

- Transit for Nashville ceded a significant timing advantage to opponents. NoTax4Tracks was able to get advertisements up on TV first,

7 Paul M. Weyrich and William S. Lind, *Twelve Anti-Transit Myths: A Conservative Critique* (Washington, DC: The Free Congress Foundation, 2001), http://fastracks01.thenewpush.com/media/uploads/nm/TwelveAntiTransitMyths_A_ConservativeCritique.pdf

8 Angie Schmitt, "Kochs Want to Kill Light Rail in Phoenix," *Streetsblog USA*, September 25, 2018, <https://usa.streetsblog.org/2018/09/25/the-koch-brothers-are-behind-a-phony-grassroots-effort-to-kill-high-rail-in-phoenix/>

Present and future Nashvillians would have benefited from more frequent service throughout the existing transit network and from high-capacity transit lines carrying tens of thousands of people every day.

causing Transit for Nashville to react and play defense rather than proactively setting the terms of the referendum debate.

- The campaign's strong emphasis on traffic reduction was fairly (if disingenuously) criticized by opponents, and a rotating roster of messengers failed to consistently frame a positive vision for what successful transit investment would do for Nashville.
- Many successful transit referendums include road spending in part to preempt criticism about traffic reduction. Tennessee's IMPROVE Act requires that funds be dedicated to transit-related improvements, which may include sidewalk and adjacent road projects. The project list could have included more projects aimed at improving first- and last-mile access to transit, and the campaign could have more intentionally emphasized those benefits in their messaging.

There is much to admire in Nashville's effort—for a city of its size, the scale of transit ambition was extraordinary and would have transformed the city.

The mayor's leadership and vision were bold, and many of Nashville's civic leaders poured heart and soul into a plan they believed in. Present and future Nashvillians would have benefited from more frequent service throughout the existing transit network and from high-capacity transit lines carrying tens of thousands of people every day.

Yet voters rejected the plan, either because they did not understand these benefits, did not believe those benefits would be appropriately shared, did not trust government to deliver those benefits, or did not believe they were worth the proposed tax increases.

The leaders who step up next to pursue dedicated, long-term transit funding in Nashville and beyond can take some comfort in knowing that failure in 2018 was not inevitable. While no transit referendum is easy, *Let's Move Nashville* leaders made avoidable strategic mistakes that eroded public trust.

There is no silver bullet for building trust—but doing so will require the humility to recognize that community members hold unique expertise and insight into their own needs and challenges. Civic leaders must include, listen to, and empower residents—particularly those who come from low-income neighborhoods and communities of color, who have long been excluded from public planning and policy-making processes—to influence decisions that tangibly affect their lives.

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Background

Transit Challenges for the “It” City

The *New York Times* anointed Nashville the nation's next “It” city in 2013, a recognition of the region's rapid growth and ascendant cultural cachet.⁹ Population in the metropolitan region increased 25 percent from 2007 to 2017, with similar growth in jobs during the same period. This has paralleled growth in annual tourism from 8.5 million visitors in 2008 to more than 15 million visitors in 2018, according to the Nashville Convention & Visitors Corporation.¹⁰ Traffic increased correspondingly, and transportation policy gained prominence in local politics.

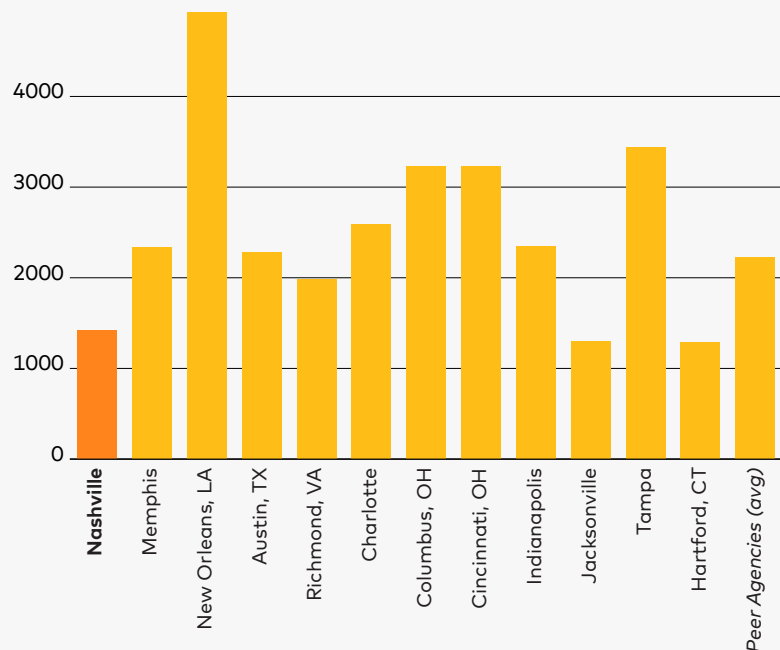


- 9 Kim Severson, "Nashville's Latest Big Hit Could Be the City Itself," *New York Times*, January 8, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/09/us/nashville-takes-its-turn-in-the-spotlight.html>
- 10 "Research & Hospitality Stats," Nashville Convention & Visitors Corporation, <https://www.visitmusiccity.com/research>
- 11 Melissa Allison, "Nashville Tops the List of Hottest Housing Markets for 2017," *Zillow*, January 6, 2017, <https://www.zillow.com/blog/hottest-housing-markets-2017-209986/>
- 12 Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce, *Nashville Region's 2018 Vital Signs*, https://s3.amazonaws.com/nashvillechamber.com/PDFs/Vs_2018_LM_FINAL.pdf
- 13 Metro Government of Nashville and Davidson County, *WalknBike: Strategic Plan for Sidewalks and Bikeways* (2017), <https://www.nashville.gov/Portals/0/SiteContent/pw/docs/transportation/WalknBike/WalknBikeFinalPlan.pdf>

Zillow dubbed Nashville the country's "hottest market" in 2017, but what can be good for property owners is not good for everyone.¹¹ Between 2006 and 2016, the average cost of housing increased 43 percent, but the median household income in Metro Nashville rose just 5.3 percent.¹²

The current, consolidated Metro Nashville government was formed in 1963 after residents of the City of Nashville and surrounding Davidson County voted to merge the two governments. Consolidation made Metro Nashville's transit service area significantly less dense than the service areas for peer cities. Metro Nashville currently has a residential density of about 1,300 people per square mile.

Because of the absence of sidewalk construction requirements for new infill development (until the passage of legislation in 2017), Metro Nashville also faces significant walkability challenges, even on major transportation corridors—as of 2017, only 19 percent of the area's streets have sidewalks. Building out Metro Nashville's "priority" sidewalk network could cost more than \$10 billion.¹³



Population Density in Transit Service Areas (persons/square mile), 2017

Service-area size and population is taken from the 2017 National Transit Database.



The street grid itself also presents challenges—Metro Nashville has a largely hub-and-spoke street network, with limited through-running streets enabling travel between the region’s “pikes”—spokes that connect Nashville to neighboring cities and towns. Most of these pikes are owned and managed by the State of Tennessee, not Metro Nashville.

Metro Nashville’s transportation mode share puts the magnitude of these challenges in stark relief: 2.2 percent commute on public transit, and another 2.1 percent walk, while approximately 88 percent drive or carpool.¹⁴ In the greater Nashville region—whose sprawling land-use patterns give it the highest average peak-period commute distance in the nation—less than 2 percent commute on transit, 1.3 percent walk, and 0.1 percent bike.¹⁵

From the Ashes of Transit Defeat

Informed by these challenges, former Mayor Karl Dean launched the *NashvilleNext* planning process, which produced a countywide land-use and transportation plan focused on increasing density along major corridors and neighborhood centers.¹⁶ As follow-ups to the *NashvilleNext* process, Metro Nashville and the Nashville Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA)—rebranded in late 2018 as WeGo Transit—developed complementary plans to expand the walking, biking, and public transit networks.

The Nashville MTA’s strategic plan—still guiding the agency’s efforts as of 2019—is called *nMotion*.¹⁷ This plan was developed after

14 U.S. Census Bureau, “2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table DP3: Selected Economic Characteristics.” American FactFinder, accessed November 1, 2019.

15 Joe Cortright, *Measuring Urban Transportation Performance: A Critique of Mobility Measures and a Synthesis* (Cleveland, OH: CEOs for Cities, 2010) <https://www.sa2020.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/driven-apart-CEOs-for-cities.pdf>

16 “NashvilleNext – Moving Forward,” Metro Government of Nashville and Davidson County, <https://www.nashville.gov/Government/NashvilleNext.aspx>

17 “nMotion,” Nashville MTA, <https://www.nmotion.info/>

The Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce had identified Metro's and Middle Tennessee's poor public transit system as a significant barrier to future growth, and CEO Ralph Schulz was the vice chairman for the coalition which supported the Amp.

the defeat of a rapid bus project called the “Amp.” The proposal was dropped in mid-2015 in the face of substantial pushback,¹⁸ a saga that earned national attention.¹⁹ The Tennessee legislature and Governor Bill Haslam helped block the Amp by passing a law requiring approval from the state legislature for dedicated bus lanes on state-owned right-of-way.

This defeat bred fear among elected and agency officials, some of whom came to view the Amp, bus lanes, and even transit more generally as politically toxic.

The MTA hired current CEO Steve Bland in the middle of the fight over the Amp. After the Dean administration decided to drop the project, Bland and the MTA salvaged a small fraction of its federal grant funding to support a strategic planning process. Much of the public backlash had focused on the lack of a broader vision for Nashville's transit system; the Amp was proposed as a stand-alone corridor. The strategic planning process would provide the agency with a viable path forward for citywide investment and expansion.

The final *nMotion* strategic plan was approved unanimously in September 2016 by both the MTA (which provides service within Metro Nashville) and the Middle Tennessee Regional Transportation Authority (RTA), which serves an additional eight counties. Nashville MTA led the *nMotion* planning process, and after receiving input from key stakeholders and members of the public, proposed three scenarios reflecting low, moderate, and high levels of transit investment. After soliciting additional public input, Nashville MTA and RTA leadership ultimately recommended the highest-investment scenario—including a massive increase in bus service and investment in an expansive light rail system—to their boards, which both endorsed it.

The Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce had identified Metro's and Middle Tennessee's poor public transit system as a significant barrier to future growth, and CEO Ralph Schulz was the vice chairman for the coalition which supported the Amp. After the Amp's failure, the chamber launched an initiative called Moving Forward, designed to amplify its members' voices in local and regional transit policy.²⁰ Via Moving Forward, the chamber engaged in the *nMotion* process and advocated strongly for the high-investment scenario. This paralleled the chamber's ongoing efforts to influence the region's political agenda. Its “leadership study mission” trips, for example, showcased transit networks in Denver, Minneapolis, and Seattle, among other cities.

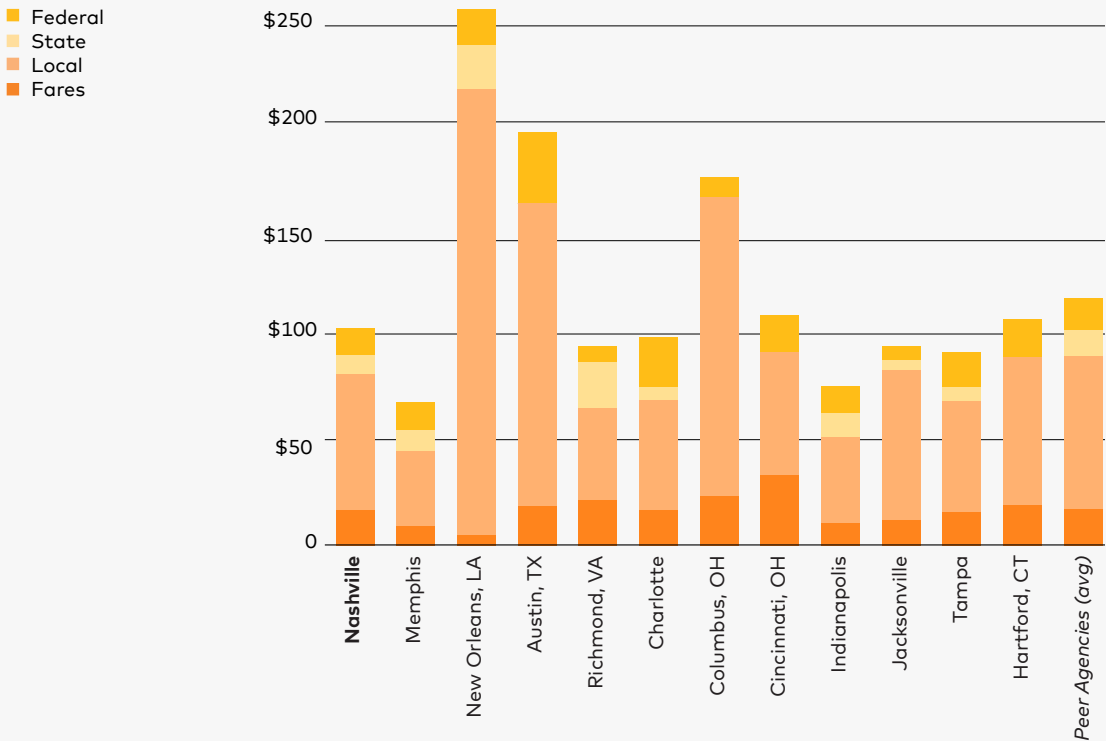
18 Steven Hale, “A Messy Fight Looms Over the Amp, Metro's Proposed Bus Rapid Transit System,” *Nashville Scene*, November 7, 2013, <https://www.nashvillescene.com/news/article/13051278/a-messy-fight-looms-over-the-amp-metros-proposed-bus-rapid-transit-system>

19 Michael Kranish, “A City's Immovable Roadblock,” *Boston Globe*, October 10, 2015, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/news/nation/2015/10/10/nashville-mayor-wanted-bring-two-parts-his-city-together-then-was-crushed-state-legislators/QT91unb8xk4xPBqkTumgMP/story.html>

20 “Moving Forward: Mobility Solutions for Our Region,” Moving Forward, <https://www.movingforwardmidtn.com/>

Per-Capita Funding for Transit Operations, 2017

Per-capita transit operations funding, for the primary operator in the cities listed; funding and service-area population is taken from the 2017 National Transit Database.



Transit, Transit, Transit

In the middle of the *nMotion* process, Nashville residents went to the polls to elect a new mayor. Megan Barry won and took office in September 2015—the first woman and first former councilmember elected as mayor of Nashville. During her campaign, Barry had talked about transit, affordable housing, and education as the three issues she intended to address in her first 100 days.²¹ In office, transit developed into her highest priority.

Prior to Barry’s election, the chamber had identified legislative barriers to stable transportation funding in the Nashville region. The chamber then worked closely with the Barry administration from its early days to pursue state legislation that would support greater transit investments in Middle Tennessee. The chamber also

21 Joey Garrison, "Megan Barry's First 100 Days: Transit, Housing, Schools," *Tennessean*, September 24, 2015, <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/politics/2015/09/24/megan-barrys-first-100-days-transit-housing-schools/72632892/>

hired a consultant to review lessons learned from twenty-five past transit referendums.

In the background, the mayor's office conducted a transportation study with the Urban Land Institute and Gabe Klein, published in 2016,²² and developed its own *Moving the Music City* action agenda, published in May 2017. The agenda document attributes this quote to Barry: "Let's talk about my main priorities as mayor: transit, transit, transit."²³ (Note: As mentioned earlier, TransitCenter advised the mayor in developing this agenda.)

On the legislative front, the timing could not have been better—entering the 2017 legislative session, Governor Haslam set out to raise the state's gas tax to fund a growing backlog of transportation projects. Enough of the legislature's Republican majority had pledged to vote against the gas tax increase that the governor needed Democratic votes. Those legislators, coordinating with the mayor's office and the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce, used their seats at the table to successfully lobby for the law to grant municipalities and counties authority to fund transit investments via public referendums. The IMPROVE Act was signed into law in late April 2017.

The IMPROVE Act provided the authority the Barry administration was hoping for, with some constraints. First, only cities and counties of a certain size can hold referendums, leaving out a few counties in Middle Tennessee, and they must do so individually, making it impossible to do a multi-county ballot initiative. Because of the consolidated Metro Nashville government, any ballot initiative would require support from a majority across the entire county. Second, the legislation limits which taxes can be raised and by how much. Third, the legislation only applies to transit projects and related investments—limiting jurisdictions' ability to package multimodal transportation improvements together.²⁴ Finally, the legislation subjected every referendum to a multistage approval process, including a detailed financial review of the plan by an independent, state-approved auditor, approval by the state comptroller, and the relevant city or county legislative body's approval to place the referendum on the ballot.

Within a few days of the IMPROVE Act's passage, Mayor Barry announced that her administration would begin planning for light rail on Gallatin Pike, the region's highest-ridership transit corridor and the only "pike" where Metro Nashville owns the bulk of the street's right-of-way.²⁵ This announcement was designed to build interest and momentum for the larger push for dedicated funding.

22 City of Nashville, Urban Land Institute Nashville, and Gabe Klein, *Gear Up 2020: Rapid Goal Setting for a 21st Century Nashville* (2016), <https://www.nashville.gov/Portals/0/SiteContent/MayorsOffice/Sustainability/docs/Gear-Up-2020-Final-Revised-8.8.16.pdf>

23 Office of the Mayor, Megan Barry, *Moving the Music City: Nashville & Davidson County's 2017–2020 Transportation Action Agenda*, https://www.nashville.gov/Portals/0/SiteContent/MayorsOffice/Nashville_524171v01.pdf, TransitCenter worked with the mayor's office in 2016–17 to develop this action agenda.

24 Recent research suggests that transit-only referendums could be harder to pass than those that focus on active transportation, road improvements, or multimodal measures. See Rebecca Lewis, Tyce Herrman, and Matthew Bean, *Sustainable Transportation at the Ballot Box* (Eugene, OR: University of Oregon Sustainable Cities Institute), https://sci.uoregon.edu/sites/sci1.uoregon.edu/files/sci_sustainable_transportation_ballot_initiative_policy_paper.pdf

25 Mayor Megan Barry, 54th Annual State of Metro Address, April 26, 2017, <https://www.nashville.gov/Portals/0/SiteContent/MayorsOffice/State%20of%20Metro%202017%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

Moving Fast

A Hasty, Secretive Transit Planning Process

The Barry administration wasted little time ramping up an all-hands-on-deck planning effort. Under the IMPROVE Act, any transit funding ballot measure had to be based on a "transit improvement program," a list of projects which would be audited by an accounting firm before Nashville's Metro Council could vote to place it on the ballot. Think of the referendum process as having two phases: this planning phase and the political campaign to win approval for the final proposal.



The mayor's planning team worked in private, with a mandate to avoid leaks at all costs. There would be no email correspondence about the plan, and meetings with outside stakeholders were limited to a bare minimum.

During the first phase, the mayor convened a team of trusted advisors and consultants to develop an ambitious plan on an ambitious timeline. They did so but failed to identify and amend weaknesses in the plan as it was developed. These shortcomings would later make the plan vulnerable to significant criticism and sap support from key constituencies.

This section and the section titled “*Money Without Strength: The Pro-Transit Campaign Stumbles to the Finish Line*” present narratives synthesized from more than forty interviews with a diverse array of stakeholders at all levels of involvement in the development of the *Let's Move Nashville* plan and the Transit for Nashville campaign. Each of these sections is followed by an original analysis (*The Planning Process, in Retrospect* and *The Campaign, in Retrospect*) intended to identify lessons for civic leaders pursuing transit referendums.

Putting the Right People in Charge

The mayor called a kickoff meeting in June with key department heads and a few trusted advisors, including her chief operating officer, a partner at local PR firm McNeely Pigott and Fox (MP&F), her communications director, the heads of Metro Nashville Public Works and the Nashville MTA, her lead advisors on transportation and sustainability, and an executive at a subsidiary of the transportation engineering firm HDR. While several people would come and go over the course of the planning process, this planning team oversaw the development of the *Let's Move Nashville* plan.

Barry entrusted her COO, Rich Riebeling, with day-to-day management of the planning effort. The mayor weighed in on key strategic decisions but preferred to stay out of the weeds. Riebeling worked in public finance prior to serving as Mayor Dean's finance chief and had developed a reputation for shrewd deal-making.²⁶

Katy Varney, a partner at MP&F, was an informal political advisor to the mayor. Varney and MP&F would later be awarded a contract with the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce to run the Transit for Nashville campaign, and Varney and Barry stayed in close contact throughout the planning process and campaign.

The mayor's planning team worked in private, with a mandate to avoid leaks at all costs. There would be no email correspondence about the plan, and meetings with outside stakeholders were limited to a bare minimum. The secrecy was driven both by a tight timetable that demanded a final plan as soon as possible and by a desire to control the narrative following the Amp's drawn-out failure. This decision

26 Joey Garrison, “Riebeling, the Fiscal Provocateur,” *City Paper*, November 22, 2009, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170227133310/http://nashvillecitypaper.com/content/city-news/riebeling-fiscal-provocateur>



A rendering of light rail on Gallatin Pike.

created significant coordination challenges for the planning team, but they felt the trade-off was worth it.

Mayor Barry charged the planning team with identifying a bold, politically viable funding source for public transit based on the *nMotion* recommendations. As a result, the group had to solve three problems in parallel: how to design the most ambitious transit plan possible, how to finance that plan with the proposed funding sources, and how to determine which funding sources would maximize their likelihood of winning a referendum vote in Metro Nashville.

Each of these problems affected the others, and each encompassed dozens of smaller strategic questions: which projects should be lifted from the existing *nMotion* plan, and which ought to be added? What potential tax-revenue sources are the largest, and how are voters likely to respond? How will the projects be sequenced and financed? Which election date presents the greatest likelihood of success?

Picking the Right Election

The question of election timing was one of the first to be answered definitively. The mayor's team considered May, August, and November dates in 2018. After reviewing research by the chamber of commerce, Mayor Barry decided to shoot for running the transit ballot measure in the Metro Nashville elections on May 1. A few advisors and campaign consultants with transit expertise challenged this decision, advocating for the higher-turnout midterm elections in November, but the May date was never seriously revisited.

In the chamber's voting models, the May Metro elections appeared to be most favorable. While turnout in these elections tends to be low, the voter base tends to lean Democratic, anchored by high African American turnout. Since Mayor Barry's poll numbers were high among African American voters at the time, this was viewed as favorable for the referendum. The May date also supported Mayor Barry's desire to move as quickly as possible and address Nashville's transportation challenges before she ran for reelection in 2019. The mayor also feared that the state legislature might repeal or unfavorably amend the legislation that enabled a referendum in the first place.

The choice of the May election introduced both political risk and time pressure to the planning process. The risk came from turnout uncertainty. May elections typically see low turnout, but high-profile issues attract additional voters, and it is hard to guess who those voters will be. The May 2018 election date also meant that the process of seeking Metro Council approval would have to start in late 2017,

The mayor's charisma and high favorability also inspired her team to support her vision, which created a feedback loop of escalating ambition.

with the independent audit completed before that. The plan would need to be completed as soon as possible.

Mayor Barry and her team aimed to finalize the plan by August 2017. This gave the team only two months to make a series of high-stakes planning decisions, complete detailed engineering, and finalize the funding strategy and financing plan. The mayor's ambitious timeline forced her staff to make these decisions hastily—decisions that would set the terms of debate in the campaign that followed.

Choosing the Right Geography

Some strategic decisions were constrained by state law. The geographic boundaries of the referendum were established by the IMPROVE Act.

As a consolidated city-county government, Metro Nashville had to run the ballot measure throughout Davidson County. But voter demographics are more favorable—and the benefits of improved transit more concentrated—in the more population-dense center of Nashville. The county's lower-density areas tend to be more politically conservative and would be less likely to benefit directly from transit investment, making it doubly harder to sell higher taxes. Some cities and regions have dealt with this by adding suburban roadway improvements to project packages,²⁷ but the IMPROVE Act restricted Metro Nashville to transit-related improvements.

Selecting Projects That Align with Planning Goals

By mandating an independent audit, the IMPROVE Act in effect requires a list of specific projects that will receive major investment. In order to run the federal government's ridership model (which would streamline federal funding eligibility down the road), this ultimately required planning down to the level of deciding where specific transit stops would be located.

The final plan was based overwhelmingly on the *nMotion* long-range planning scenario, which called for high-capacity transit routes aligned with corridors slated for high-density development in Metro's *NashvilleNext* comprehensive plan. The *nMotion* plan had been finalized less than a year prior, and Nashville MTA had generated more than 18,000 survey responses and comments in its public engagement process, according to the agency's community engagement report.

Still, *nMotion* had stopped short of the level of detail that would be required to run a referendum under the IMPROVE Act. The mayor's team also needed to decide what to prioritize. The largest gap in

27 Peter J. Haas et al., *Why Campaigns for Local Transportation Initiatives Succeed or Fail: An Analysis of Four Communities and National Data* (San Jose, CA: Mineta Transportation Institute, 2000), <https://transweb.sjsu.edu/sites/default/files/00-01.pdf>

the *nMotion* plan is a “grey box” that sits over downtown Nashville, leaving out the details of how to route transit in the region’s most complex, congested area.



With limited transit-planning capacity on staff, the city brought in two transportation consulting firms. Nashville MTA hired CDM Smith, then brought on HDR soon after, in part because the mayor’s office perceived Butch Eley, a senior executive at HDR who had advised the mayor’s office in early planning conversations, as having essential expertise. CDM Smith was tasked with supporting planning for bus system improvements, while HDR was assigned to the rail system.

Early discussions included financial scenarios of \$1–2 billion in capital investment with one or two initial light rail corridors, but the scope expanded rapidly. This expansion was fueled by Barry’s desire to propose the most ambitious plan around which she felt she could rally support. The mayor’s charisma and high favorability also inspired her team to support her vision, which created a feedback loop of escalating ambition. Absent more specific goals or design constraints, the planning team and their engineering consultants extended the lines on the map as the budget grew.

Amid the focus on major capital projects, bus improvements got lost in the shuffle.

Three separate Barry advisors managed three separate consultants, creating coordination challenges almost immediately. Engineering and design of the light rail system was under Metro Nashville Public Works head Mark Sturtevant, who had managed the implementation of several high-profile infrastructure projects, including Nissan Stadium, Bridgestone Arena, and Music City Center. Not having a transit background, Sturtevant deferred to HDR for much of the technical decision-making. Nashville MTA CEO Steve Bland and his planning staff oversaw CDM Smith and the bus system design. And Rich Riebeling hired Goldman Sachs to develop models to determine funding sources and produce the overall financing plan.

With no emails exchanged between weekly coordination meetings, members of the planning team would arrive to these meetings and find entirely new high-capacity transit lines on the map. Multiple members of the planning team felt the project leaders were asking how much they *could* do within the constraints of the financial models, rather than what they *should* do to provide the greatest benefit to Nashville and maximize the likelihood of success on the ballot. For example, when a choice between two potential rail lines was posed, the mayor's team asked Goldman Sachs to run the numbers on funding both, just to see what it looked like. Both lines ended up in the completed plan. As the project list grew, so did the budget—and so did the proposed tax rates.

For a few reasons, the planning team took it as a given that there would be some light rail—it was merely a question of how much. Mayor Barry's views aligned with chamber of commerce members' desire to use light rail to concentrate growth along planned corridors, a goal that also aligned with Metro's *NashvilleNext* and *nMotion* plans. The chamber and several members of the planning team saw rail investment as important for preserving regional competitiveness with Denver and other cities that have made high-profile rail investments. Several planning team members concluded from the failed Amp project that it would be politically difficult to gain support for and preserve dedicated right-of-way for buses. Finally, the planning team—especially senior members—believed that the novelty of light rail would be necessary to attract new riders in an environment where the bus is often described using racially coded language and viewed as being a lifeline service.

Mayor Barry insisted on one major amendment to the existing *nMotion* map: that the team find a way to connect the proposed Northwest



rail corridor directly to the other rail lines, where previously it had a separate terminus. This change was intended to make the plan more equitable, improving access to and investment in North Nashville, a historically African American neighborhood divided by Interstate 40. This amendment was vetted by a small group of African American Nashvillians whom the mayor's office viewed as important allies.

Figuring out how to fill the *nMotion* plan's downtown "grey box" would be one of the planning team's toughest challenges. The grey box had been left empty in large part because MTA leadership felt more in-depth study would be required to identify which downtown streets would be best suited to prioritize transit.

Keeping transit moving in a bustling downtown requires dedicated right-of-way, which can come in the form of either dedicated lanes on existing streets or adding new right-of-way above or below ground. These solutions were debated. Tunneling would have significant budget implications, but allocating downtown right-of-way for bus service would be an intensely contested political undertaking and logistically difficult given the narrow streets and frequent special events that close entire corridors. It took a weekend design sprint for the consulting engineers and the planning team's infrastructure experts to settle on a solution.

Amid the focus on these major capital projects, bus improvements got lost in the shuffle. Multiple members of the mayor's planning team raised questions about the growing emphasis on rail, but more senior officials dismissed their concerns. The mayor's transportation lead and Nashville MTA's CEO had to push the planning team to include bus improvements in the near-term project list and to increase the overall level of bus operating support.

Identifying Funding Sources and Project Sequencing

Because of the IMPROVE Act's requirements, only five funding sources were available: sales tax, business tax, motor vehicle ("wheel") tax, rental car tax, and hotel tax. Polling showed that the wheel tax was intensely unpopular. By a wide margin, the sales tax would generate the most revenue. Given the mayor's ambition, it was a foregone conclusion that a sales tax increase would anchor any proposed plan, even though Nashville already had a high sales tax (9.25 percent).

Metro Nashville COO Rich Riebeling coordinated with Goldman Sachs to develop the financing plan in parallel with the project list. Financing for the plan would be determined by the project list—how

The coalition was a top-down enterprise. Coalition members received directions from campaign leadership, and the coalition co-chairs were not empowered to make decisions.

much for capital spending and how much for ongoing operational costs—and by the sequencing of implementation. Building major projects one at a time would likely lower borrowing costs but also drag out the realization of the plan’s benefits over decades. On the other end of the spectrum, front-loading the construction of many projects in parallel would deliver greater transportation benefits more quickly but at greater borrowing cost, adding financial risk and potentially shrinking the list of projects that could be built. The decision to develop many projects in parallel also would have placed a heavy burden on staff time.

Polling and focus groups suggested that voter support on the political left would not be strongly correlated to the plan’s price tag. Nashville is a relatively left-leaning place, and these findings likely dampened possible concerns about the overall cost of the plan.

Reaching Out—Selectively

Outreach in advance of the plan’s launch was limited after the administration decided to move quickly and quietly. In addition to the aforementioned meetings with select African American community leaders, a few Metro councilmembers were granted meetings—at their request—to review early plan drafts. These councilmembers, who included long-time transit champion and former Nashville MTA board chair Freddie O’Connell and at-large councilman John Cooper, had heard rumblings about the plan and wanted more detail. Both met multiple times with planning team staff and consultants before the plan’s release.

Nashville has a strong-mayor system. Nashville–Davidson County’s Metro Council is composed of forty members who are paid approximately \$23,000 annually. Councilmembers either can give limited time to the office while maintaining a full-time job or can afford not to work full-time outside their elected role. As a result, Metro Council is broadly perceived to follow the mayor’s lead—a dynamic that many councilmembers resent and which mayors have routinely used to their advantage.

Building a Supportive Coalition

Knowing that a referendum was imminent, the chamber of commerce released a request for proposals for campaign consultants in July 2017.

Later that summer, the chamber formed the Transit for Nashville (T4N) coalition and, after recruiting an initial cohort of thirty-seven



The Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce had taken business and elected leaders on study trips to see transit in other U.S. cities.

member organizations, launched in September 2017 at an event with Mayor Barry, roughly a month before the mayor would formally announce the *Let's Move Nashville* plan.

The T4N coalition had three co-chairs drawn from key constituencies—Nashville's chapter of the Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA), the Urban League of Middle Tennessee, and AARP Tennessee. The chamber had reached out to LIUNA early on to leverage its campaign expertise—LIUNA had played an integral role in a successful “local hire” referendum and was a natural ally for a referendum that would advance major capital construction projects.

T4N grew its ranks over time, with one paid campaign staffer dedicated to managing relationships and engagement with the coalition. By the end of the campaign, it would have 136 member organizations from the business, educational, and nonprofit community.

From the beginning, though, members felt that the coalition was a top-down enterprise. Coalition members received directions from campaign leadership, and the coalition co-chairs were not empowered to make decisions. The co-chair from LIUNA, who was close with the campaign manager, was the only co-chair to participate in strategy meetings. Campaign leadership chose not to include the other two co-chairs in those strategy meetings, engaging with them separately.

The campaign also struggled to bring social justice organizations on board. Some had broad reservations about working with the chamber of commerce, while others had specific reservations about being affiliated with coalition members—including private-prison owner/operator CoreCivic—whose work was directly at odds with their missions.

The Final Plan

Mayor Barry presented the plan to the public in October, seven months before the vote. The planning team made changes right up until the release, identifying a miscalculation in the financial models that enabled one of the light rail lines to be extended. Vice Mayor David Briley, three former Nashville mayors, and several state legislators and Metro Council members were on hand for the formal launch—some to hear the plan's details for the first time.²⁸

The fifty-five-page plan featured five light rail lines, four rapid bus corridors, up to twenty "neighborhood transit centers," and one tunnel to shuttle all these improved transit routes through downtown. Also included were sidewalk and bike upgrades along light rail and rapid bus corridors, plus increased funds for the bus and paratransit operations, digital integration with other transportation options, additional subsidies for

low-income transit riders, a variety of improvements to the transit agency's fare payment system, and more. The package would be paid for by increases to sales, business, hotel, and rental car taxes.

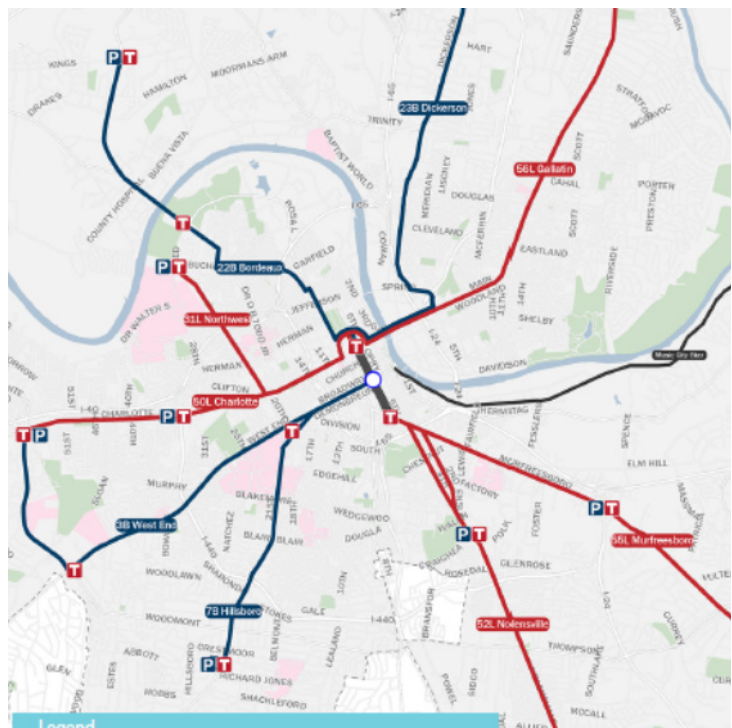
Barry described the plan as a \$5.4 billion investment, referring to estimated capital costs. But factoring in operations, maintenance costs, and debt service through 2032, the total came to \$8.9 billion. This discrepancy, and the accompanying perception of being misled, figured prominently in the opposition campaign.

Members of the planning team were surprised that opponents did not go further. Since the financial analysis only ran through 2032, the plan's total cost would technically be higher still when taking the full thirty-year loan repayment terms into account.

Of the \$5.4 billion upfront capital investment, \$1 billion was for bus improvements, \$3.4 billion for light

28 Joey Garrison, "Nashville Mayor Megan Barry Unveils Ambitious Mass Transit Plan for Music City," *Tennessean*, Oct. 17, 2017, <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/2017/10/17/nashville-mayor-megan-barry-unveils-ambitious-mass-transit-plan-for-music-city/759973001/>

Map from *Let's Move Nashville* plan



rail, and \$1 billion for the tunnel, which would be used by both bus and rail. Additional annual operations and maintenance costs were forecast to be just over \$50 million for the five rail lines and roughly \$30 million for frequent bus routes.

Investing more than 60 percent of the plan's budget into five light rail corridors was less lopsided than it might seem, because the MTA forecast that roughly half of total system ridership would be concentrated on these five corridors by 2040. Considering the "full"

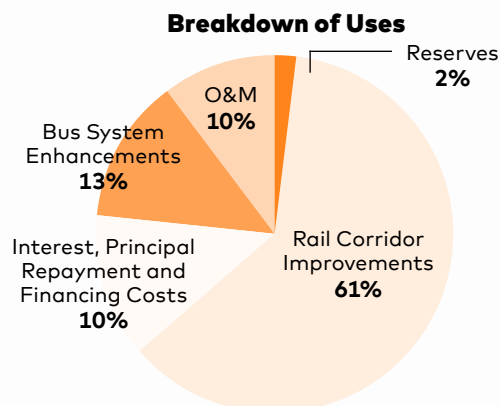
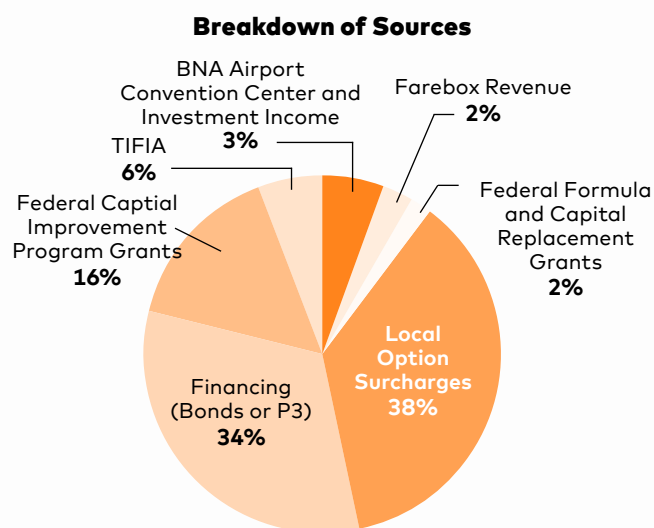
\$8.9 billion cost breakdown through 2032, however, the percentage of funding for light rail was closer to 80 percent, factoring in debt service and operations.

Let's Move Nashville proponents believed it would be politically easier to preserve dedicated right-of-way for light rail and that light rail investment would help concentrate growth and development along those corridors.

Still, none of the light rail lines had a projected 2040 ridership greater than 11,300 trips per day. Frequent

| Sources | \$ mm | % |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|---------------|
| Local Option Surcharges | \$3,387 | 37.8% |
| Farebox Revenue | 192 | 2.1% |
| Financing (Bonds or P3) | 3,022 | 33.8% |
| TIFIA | 500 | 5.6% |
| Federal Capital Improvement Program Grants | 1,434 | 16.0% |
| Federal Formula and Capital Replacement Grants | 153 | 1.7% |
| BNA Airport Participation, Convention Center Contribution and Investment Income | 262 | 2.9% |
| Total Sources | \$8,951 | 100.0% |

| Uses | \$ mm | % |
|----------------------------------------------------|----------------|---------------|
| Rail Corridor Improvements | \$5,475 | 61.2% |
| Bus System Enhancements | 1,146 | 12.8% |
| Interest, Principal Repayment and Fincancial Costs | 1,185 | 13.2% |
| O&M | 934 | 10.4% |
| Reserves | 211 | 2.4% |
| Total Uses | \$8,951 | 100.0% |



Valuable components of the plan were often overlooked in the arguments about higher-cost elements. Major sidewalk investments—among the most popular elements of the plan—along each rail and rapid bus corridor would have yielded significant safety and transit-access improvements.

bus routes in Houston²⁹ and Denver³⁰ routinely carry more people. Further, the total cost of building all four rapid bus lines was estimated to be less than the cost of building any of the five light rail corridors individually—though these were not planned as “gold-standard” bus rapid transit.

While the *Let’s Move Nashville* plan proposed building out all five of the light rail corridors in *nMotion*’s “high investment” scenario, it ignored *nMotion*’s recommendation to increase bus operations funding by \$170 million annually, instead suggesting a smaller increase of around \$30 million.

The proposed corridor investments broadly supported racial equity goals. The Nolensville, Murfreesboro, and Northwest light rail corridors—as well as the Bordeaux and Dickerson rapid bus corridors—have a higher concentration of people of color than Nashville as a whole. The Charlotte and Gallatin light rail corridors and the Hillsboro and West End rapid bus corridors are slightly less racially diverse than the city as a whole.

The dedicated right-of-way provided by the tunnel would have produced substantial performance benefits across transit routes by avoiding surface congestion and traffic lights. Given the intense political pushback that the tunnel generated during the campaign, in retrospect it is not obvious that it was less contentious than running transit at street level.

Valuable components of the plan were often overlooked in the arguments about higher-cost elements. Major sidewalk investments—among the most popular elements of the plan—along each rail and rapid bus corridor would have yielded significant safety and transit-access improvements.

Some of the plan’s lesser-known features were small line items in the budget yet would have provided substantial equity and community benefits. The plan called for the addition of several new crosstown bus routes and as many as twenty new “neighborhood transit centers” to smooth operations and better facilitate transfers across the frequent transit network. AccessRide—Nashville’s paratransit service—would have received an additional \$10 million annually to improve service and provide same-day trip availability. Finally, Nashville MTA would have funded a low-income fare-subsidy program to the tune of \$2.5 million annually, partially offsetting the regressive impacts of the proposed sales tax increase.

29 “March 2018 (Fiscal Year 2018) Ridership Summary,” Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County, <https://www.ridemetro.org/Pages/RidershipReport-032018.aspx>

30 David Sachs, “Hancock Makes Room for Colfax BRT in 2016 Budget,” *Streetsblog* Denver, October 5, 2015, <https://denver.streetsblog.org/2015/10/05/hancock-makes-room-for-colfax-brt-in-2016-budget/>

The Planning Process, in Retrospect

No matter how strong and committed the political campaign lobbying for a transit referendum's passage, success or failure depends on how voters perceive the quality of the plan. That gives early strategic decisions outsized importance, because those decisions affect not only the remainder of the planning process but the entirety of the campaign that follows.



At the end of the day, transit riders care less about what's sexy and more about what's useful—they want fast, frequent, reliable transit service that they can walk to.

Propelled by an admirable sense of urgency, Mayor Barry and her team made many of those early strategic decisions in haste, potentially at great cost to the ultimate referendum results.

Include and foreground a diverse range of voices in the decision-making process

In retrospect, it is hard to overstate the importance of deciding whom to invite to the first planning meeting. Understandably, Mayor Barry included her closest advisors and trusted deputies, and her team brought in additional experts as necessary.

Barry's inner circle, however, held relatively homogeneous views about what Nashville's public transit system should look like—namely that it should be big, bold, and anchored by light rail.

The leading voices in the planning, political, and financial decision-making were also predisposed to go big. Mark Sturtevant of Public Works had already managed Nashville's biggest infrastructure projects; MP&F prides itself on having helped many of those same projects succeed, and as a close advisor to Mayor Barry, MP&F's Varney was personally invested in the mayor's success and legacy; and Rich Riebeling had a passion for making big projects happen.

Make improving access to high-quality transit the North Star of your planning process

These factors combined to create unchecked momentum toward the biggest plan that the planning team could justify and a propensity to ask how to add more to the plan's project list rather than whether they should. Senior leaders dismissed many of the concerns raised by more junior staff and team members with less influence.

The mayor and planning team leadership perceived light rail to be sexier than buses, more likely to gain political support, and more likely to appeal to Nashvillians who might be skeptical of the existing bus system. But at the end of the day, transit riders care less about what's sexy and more about what's useful—they want fast, frequent, reliable transit service that they can walk to. While the proposed plan would have provided significant access improvements, buses can achieve equivalent benefits more affordably, especially given population and job densities as low as Nashville's.

This does not mean that Nashville should not develop light rail—the planning team's choice to include five rail lines, however, crowded out the opportunity to provide more widespread transportation access improvements through a major increase in bus service.

As the campaign progressed, affordable housing and concerns about gentrification rose to the forefront of Nashville politics.



At nearly \$1 billion, the downtown tunnel was among the plan's most controversial components. It would have yielded reliability, safety, and urban design benefits, but it had not been included in the *nMotion* plan. The planning team may have underestimated the political risks of introducing this concept in the context of the referendum, especially given the significant added cost and potential construction disruptions.

Act with an appropriate amount of urgency

By choosing the May 2018 election, Mayor Barry created intense time pressure, generating a host of challenges for the planning team that rippled into the political campaign. While the mayor admirably believed that government should act quickly, there is such a thing as too fast. In order to meet the tight deadline and prevent leaks, the planning team rushed to make early strategic decisions and minimized outreach to key constituencies and the broader public.

Senior members of the planning team acknowledge that, even under the approach they took, they should have done more work up front to engage potential allies on the Metro Council and within the Transit for Nashville coalition, who could have been stronger supporters.

If the election were held a few months later, civic leaders would have had more time to build a stronger coalition. The mayor's urgency was admirable but may have eroded the ultimate chances for success.

Build your plan on a foundation of inclusive, meaningful public outreach

The planning team assumed that previous public outreach conducted for Metro's *NashvilleNext* and Nashville MTA's *nMotion* plans

Twenty-nine percent of Nashvillians (and approximately 50 percent of Nashville’s transit riders, according to the 2016 American Community Survey) are African American, but only 9 percent of nMotion public comments came from African American residents.

was sufficient, but this assumption was based on shaky foundations. The first problem was that the people and organizations engaged in the *nMotion* planning process did not reflect the population of Davidson County. For example, 78 percent of the public comments Nashville MTA received came from white Nashvillians, but only 55 percent of Nashvillians are white. Twenty-nine percent of Nashvillians (and approximately 50 percent of Nashville’s transit riders, according to the 2016 American Community Survey) are African American, but only 9 percent of comments came from African American residents.³¹

In both the *nMotion* and *Let’s Move Nashville* planning processes, the desires of Nashville’s existing transit riders appear to have been neglected. Current transit riders were the least supportive group polled about *nMotion*’s recommended scenario. Most *nMotion* participants did favor the “high investment” proposal, as did the most vocal local transit advocates. But the Nashville MTA’s *nMotion* Community Engagement appendix warned that “current transit riders prefer short-term and immediate solutions to improve current service, rather than long-term, region-wide solutions.”³²

Mayor Barry and her team might have developed a more resilient plan by including people of color—and a greater diversity of perspectives, more generally—in their central decision-making process. The planning team vetted the plan with people of color in senior roles within the Barry administration and with several community leaders outside the administration. But there is an important difference between discussing the plan with people of color and empowering people of color to contribute directly to key decisions. The latter is essential to expose blind spots that arise when people with relatively homogeneous perspectives are not pushed outside their comfort zones.

Including a diversity of perspectives—lower-income people, students, seniors, faith-based communities, and more—is one of the central functions of a successful community engagement process. The absence of such a process in the *Let’s Move Nashville* planning effort dampened support in a variety of ways, from emboldening opponents upset by its price tag to giving supporters reason to doubt the plan’s legitimacy.

Despite their professional commitment to supporting the plan, *Let’s Move Nashville* campaign staff would later report that it overemphasized the interests of real estate developers and Nashville’s monied elite. No-Tax4Tracks also pushed this message aggressively, and the lack of public engagement made Transit for Nashville vulnerable to the critique. *Let’s Move Nashville* supporters largely failed to get traction on their counterargument—namely, the diverse benefits of concentrating

31 Nashville Metropolitan Transit Authority and the Regional Transportation Authority of Middle Tennessee, *nMotion Final Community Engagement Report: January–July 2016*, https://nmotion.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/nMotion-Community-Engagement-Report_Final.pdf

32 Nashville Metropolitan Transit Authority and the Regional Transportation Authority of Middle Tennessee, *nMotion Final Community Engagement Report: January–July 2016*, https://nmotion.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/nMotion-Community-Engagement-Report_Final.pdf



the region's rapid growth along major, transit-supportive corridors.

Several elected officials and community leaders who were expected to be strong champions had to be convinced to support the plan after its release, and only did so after overcoming initial reservations, either through conversations with the mayor's office or by negotiating specific changes to the plan. Even the chamber of commerce—one of the strongest advocates of a light rail-focused transit network in the *nMotion* process—was surprised by the plan's high cost and emphasis on rail. Natural allies should not need to be won over. Outreach that enabled participants to genuinely influence major decisions could have generated more enthusiastic buy-in for the plan.

Consider equity and opportunity costs in your funding and financing plans

Raising revenue and sequencing project implementation raise important equity, financial, and political considerations for a referendum plan. Sales tax polled most favorably among the taxes tested with voters, and it remains Nashville's only viable source of significant revenue under the IMPROVE Act. Still, it is a regressive tax, and Nashville's sales tax is already relatively high, at 9.25 percent. The regressive nature of sales tax should be accounted for in the planning process by taking extra care to prioritize investments that address the identified needs and priorities of the low-income communities likely to be adversely impacted by such a tax—in other words, to provide disproportionate benefit in exchange for disproportionate burden.

The *Let's Move Nashville* plan's proposed light rail lines were sequenced in a way that was likely to increase their long-term cost—namely, by constructing several lines simultaneously in order to complete the entire proposed system as soon as possible. This increased the need to borrow, creating a corresponding increase in long-term financing costs and an accompanying decrease in revenues available to support transit operations. The tight proposed implementation timeline also gave skeptics additional talking points related to potential cost overruns, delays, and extended adverse traffic impacts. These talking points were often made in bad faith, but the proposal could have been structured to minimize their validity.

Instead of a package weighted toward high upfront costs and debt spending, tax revenues could have allocated to fund comparatively major increases in bus service. The mayor's office could also have proposed a more modest tax increase as a starting point—as they initially planned—to fund immediate improvements in hopes of building longer-term public support for transit investment.

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Money Without Strength

The Pro-Transit Campaign Stumbles to the Finish Line

This case study focuses more on the impact of key strategic decisions than on the mechanics of political campaigns (for example, fundraising and get-out-the-vote strategy), which are beyond TransitCenter's expertise. Any political campaign is filled with surprising twists and turns, and this one is no exception. But there are still valuable lessons to be learned from the key strategic decisions that Transit for Nashville leadership made after planning was complete. Further, some of the campaign's challenges in the spring of 2018 also highlight the shortcomings of various strategic decisions that Mayor Barry and her team made in designing the Let's Move Nashville plan.





Transitioning into the Campaign

Metro Nashville began its public outreach after the mayor's October plan announcement. They organized "transit talks" with the public and with local businesses and also met in person with other key stakeholders in order to provide details and answer questions about the plan. These talks continued throughout the campaign. Metro staff would also present the plan at events organized in relation to the campaign itself, though they could not technically advocate for people to support the referendum.

Fundraising and Selecting the Right Campaign Consultants

The chamber did not have trouble hitting its fundraising goals, in part because of its baseline relationships with major institutions and employers and in part because of the groundwork the chamber had laid through study trips and member education, including its Moving Forward initiative. The chamber considered a small donor campaign but never launched it. In the end, a small fraction of 1 percent of donations would come from individual donors.

The chamber circulated a request for proposals to hire a campaign consultant in July 2017. Chamber CEO Ralph Schulz, Rich Riebeling, and a senior executive at a chamber member company evaluated the proposals and hired MP&F. The evaluators felt this local company, based in Nashville since 1987, presented a proposal that was as strong as those from national firms and offered the added bonus of its principals having preexisting relationships with the mayor and other local stakeholders. Katy Varney led MP&F's effort on the project, with Dave Cooley of Cooley Public Strategies headlining a long list of subcontractors focused on various facets of voter outreach and engagement. This MP&F-led team developed the campaign's strategy.

After MP&F got to work, the chamber also hired a campaign manager, Robin Alberts-Marigza, who had experience working on state and federal election campaigns. Not counting MP&F employees, who split their time between the transit campaign and their other projects, or MP&F's subcontractors, the campaign ultimately hired four employees.

Structuring the Campaign for Success

Varney, Alberts-Marigza, and Cooley were the campaign's core strategy and decision-making team, giving direction to campaign staff, sub-consultants, and coalition members, often during weekly all-hands check-in meetings. Varney was the campaign's primary

The campaign’s door-to-door canvassing efforts were led by political campaign consultants rather than local community organizers—in contrast to both previous and subsequently successful Nashville ballot initiatives.

liaison to the mayor’s office. She, Cooley, and Alberts-Marigza reported to the chamber, which was kept in the loop but not involved in day-to-day campaign decisions. Once the campaign started, the chamber mainly weighed in on major budget decisions, media buys, or requests for additional funding. Neither Varney as the lead consultant nor Alberts-Marigza as the campaign manager explicitly had final decision-making power within the strategy group, but Alberts-Marigza and Cooley generally deferred to Varney when opinions among the strategy team differed.

The three additional full-time campaign staff were tasked with coalition management, media and public relations, community outreach, and social media. Subcontractors and individual consultants took on a variety of projects, including direct voter outreach and specific outreach in the Latinx, African American, and faith-based communities.

Setting the Campaign Strategy

The campaign’s outreach effort had several components, including tabling at major events, traditional door-to-door canvassing, a “speakers’ bureau,” and an early petition drive. They also sent representatives to participate in public forums. The campaign emphasized paid media, a strength of the PR agencies that ran the campaign.

The campaign’s door-to-door canvassing efforts were led by political campaign consultants rather than local community organizers—in contrast to both previous and subsequently successful Nashville ballot initiatives. This “ground game” focused heavily on urban neighborhoods near the center of Nashville. Central Nashville neighborhoods would see the greatest immediate and long-term benefits from the plan’s implementation and had the highest concentration of voters likely to support the plan. Coalition organizations with local members felt confused and out of the loop about who was running outreach and in which neighborhoods, and often did not understand how they could contribute.

As part of the campaign’s “speakers’ bureau,” the campaign trained community representatives to give a ten-slide presentation about the plan, in effect increasing the campaign’s capacity for outreach. They trained approximately sixty speakers. Part of the campaign’s expectation for the speakers’ bureau was that these representatives would tailor the ten slides and the campaign’s messaging to meet the specific audience, but, anecdotally, volunteers did so infrequently in practice.

The campaign designed the petition drive—marketed as an initiative of the Transit for Nashville coalition—to build support for Metro

The strong emphasis on traffic was controversial within the campaign. People with transit expertise pushed back, but campaign leaders dismissed these perspectives.

Council approval and to develop the campaign's voter identification database. The petition pledge was simple: "I'm for transit, and I'm willing to help pay for it. We can't afford to wait." The campaign set a goal to get 30,000 signatures. As the internal deadline approached, the campaign emphasized hitting the numerical target, and the focus on building the voter ID database waned.

The campaign's strategy also relied heavily on Mayor Barry as its chief spokesperson. While other champions of the transit referendum emerged and spoke on its behalf, none offered the same combination of visibility, popularity, and knowledge of the plan's details. As the campaign launched, Barry polled with support from more than 70 percent of Nashville voters.

The campaign designed its messaging strategy to focus on the plan's big-picture goals rather than the plan's details, in large part because message testing suggested doing so would be more effective at building support.

The campaign's headline message was "Less gridlock, more time for what matters." To campaign leaders, this felt like an obvious choice. In general issue-awareness polling, traffic congestion had rapidly risen to Nashvillians' number-one concern, and campaign leadership viewed traffic relief as a means of collapsing the complexity of transit policy into a single talking point.

This strong emphasis on traffic was controversial within the campaign. People with transit expertise pushed back, noting that better transit allows more people to avoid congestion but does not reduce congestion over time. The campaign leaders dismissed these perspectives, trusting their polling data and their intuition.

Outreach and Controversy Ramp Up in Late 2017

Public outreach informed a few minor tweaks to the plan before it was finalized and sent to a financial auditor for approval. Then in early December the plan was put to the first of three Metro Council votes necessary to get the referendum on the May ballot. It passed easily.

In early November, Mayor Barry stirred controversy, especially in the African American community, by announcing that the Metro government would end Nashville General Hospital's inpatient operations. General Hospital is located in North Nashville, a historically African American neighborhood undergoing rapid gentrification, and serves as both a healthcare provider for underserved populations and a major employer.

The General Hospital announcement followed a string of Barry

- 33 Evidence on the impact of transit investment on property values shows that the magnitude of impact varies significantly and is hard to predict—but also suggests that the impact of rail investment is greater than the impact of improved bus service, including bus rapid transit (BRT). See Miriam Zuk et al., “Gentrification, Displacement, and the Role of Public Investment,” *Journal of Planning Literature* 33, no. 1 (February 2018): 31–44, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0885412217716439#articleCitationDownloadContainer>
- 34 Natalie Allison, “Protesters hold ‘funeral procession’ for gentrification,” *Tennessean*, November 2, 2017, <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/2017/11/02/nashville-transit-protest-gentrification-funeral-procession/826656001/>
- 35 “Robot Cars vs. Transit,” TransitCenter, <http://transitcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/RobotCars.pdf>
- 36 Jarrett Walker, “The Bus Is Still Best,” *Atlantic*, October 31, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/10/bus-best-public-transit-cities/574399/>
- 37 “Designing to Move People,” National Association of City Transportation Officials, <https://nacto.org/publication/transit-street-design-guide/introduction/why/designing-move-people/>

administration decisions that eroded trust among African American residents. After a Metro Nashville police officer shot Jockues Clemmons three times in the back in February 2017, the Barry administration agreed with the Metro District Attorney’s decision not to bring charges against the officer. In July 2017, in the face of public pushback the Barry administration backtracked on a proposal that would have brought the YMCA in Bordeaux—another historically African American neighborhood—under Metro Parks and Recreation ownership.

A proposal to convert an abandoned baseball stadium into a private, mixed-use development called “Cloud Hill” met resistance from affordable housing advocates, preservationists, open-space advocates, and the African American community alike. The site is home to the graves of enslaved and indentured people who helped construct Fort Negley, a relic of the Civil War.

The emphasis of *Let’s Move Nashville* on rail also raised questions from affordable housing advocates, who feared that without sufficient protections in place, new light rail lines could accelerate gentrification and displacement.³³ The People’s Alliance for Transit, Housing and Employment (PATHE), for example, led a widely covered “funeral procession” mourning neighborhoods “lost” to gentrification and cited past broken promises of affordable housing and community benefits.³⁴ In response to these concerns, Mayor Barry launched a “Transit and Affordability Taskforce” charged with recommending policies for the Metro government to pursue in parallel with the transit plan.

Techno Optimism

In addition to the other themes discussed in more detail, the *Let’s Move Nashville* referendum presents a prototypical case of the dangers of political obsession with shiny objects. Opponents commonly argued that light rail is or will soon be “outdated” or “obsolete” technology, often waving their hands when asked for specifics of the system that will replace it. While light rail may or may not be the best technology for Nashville, neither autonomous vehicles³⁵ nor smaller, on-demand transit vehicles³⁶ can match public transit’s ability to move many people in a limited amount of space.

There is a fundamental geometry of our street space that new technologies cannot change—light rail or bus rapid transit service running in dedicated lanes can carry as many as 25,000 people per hour, while car lanes can carry about 1,600.³⁷ The value of public transit remains indisputable in any large city that takes seriously the imperative to provide affordable, sustainable transportation options to all of its residents.

- 38 "Newcomer 'Better Transit 4 Nashville' Joins the Fight Against the Metro City Council's \$9 Billion Transit Plan," *Tennessee Star*, March 9, 2018, <https://tennesseestar.com/2018/03/09/newcomer-better-transit-4-nashville-joins-the-fight-against-the-metro-city-councils-9-billion-transit-plan/>
- 39 "What is Plan 'B'?" Nashville Plan "B," <http://nashvilleplanb.com/plan-b-explained/>
- 40 Alex Kasprak et al., "Hiding in Plain Sight: PAC-Connected Activists Set Up 'Local News' Outlets," *Snopes*, March 4, 2019, <https://www.snopes.com/news/2019/03/04/activists-setup-local-news-sites/>
- 41 "Beacon Traffic Reduction Proposal," Beacon Center of Tennessee, http://www.beacontn.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/BCN_TransitPlan.pdf
- 42 Laura Baigert, "Experts at Beacon Center's 'Off Track: What's Wrong with Nashville's Transit Plan & What We Should Do Instead' Slam Mayor Barry's Scheme," *Tennessee Star*, January 28, 2018, <https://tennesseestar.com/2018/01/28/beacon-centers-off-track-whats-wrong-with-nashvilles-transit-plan-what-we-should-do-instead-summit-slams-mayor-barrys-scheme/>
- 43 Wendy Wilson, "Cato Institute Expert: Nashville Mayor Megan Barry's Transit Plan 'A Bad Investment,'" *Tennessee Star*, November 16, 2017, <https://tennesseestar.com/2017/11/16/cato-institute-expert-nashville-mayor-megan-barrys-mass-transit-plan-a-bad-investment/>
- 44 Jamie McGee, "Swope Offers Another Nashville Transit Plan: Autonomous Vehicles, Stacked Interstates," *Tennessean*, April 10, 2018, <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/2018/04/10/councilman-swopes-nashville-transit-stacked-interstates/500574002/>

Anger over discriminatory police violence eroded support for Mayor Barry in African American neighborhoods.

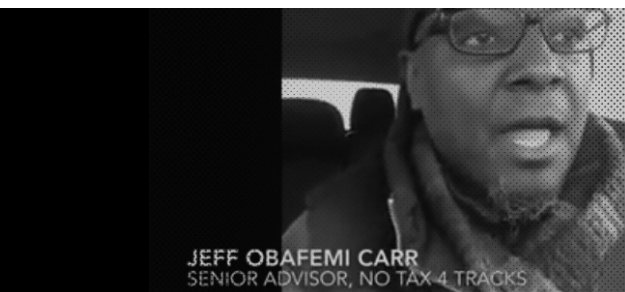
January 2018: The Calm Before the Storm

In early January, the campaign seemed to be hitting its stride, presenting 30,322 petition signatures just before the Metro Council's second of three votes. Meanwhile, the primary opposition campaign, NoTax4Tracks, was set to launch, but behind closed doors its leaders were not hopeful.

Metro's Transit and Affordability Taskforce published recommendations in early January, at which time the Barry administration announced the withdrawal of both its General Hospital and Cloud Hill development proposals. In the chamber of commerce's regular public opinion polling, affordable housing had replaced traffic and transportation as Nashville residents' top concern.

Transit for Nashville's primary opposition group, NoTax4Tracks, formally launched in mid-January. Other opposition groups like the relatively anonymous Better Transit for Nashville (organized by prominent Amp opponent Rick Williams)³⁸ and a PAC-proposed "Plan B" (supported by a conservative political consultant and local entrepreneur)³⁹ had formed but did not operate on NoTax4Tracks's scale.⁴⁰ The Beacon Center of Tennessee also argued strongly against the plan, proposing an "alternative" plan⁴¹ and convening local events⁴² including a who's who of anti-transit speakers from other conservative think tanks like the Cato Institute⁴³ and the Heritage Foundation. A third "alternative" plan was published by Metro Councilmember Robert Swope on the eve of early voting.⁴⁴





None of the opposition groups were run by existing grassroots organizations, none appear to have included women in leadership roles, and the only person of color visibly involved was a paid spokesperson. Further, none of the proposed “alternative” plans acknowledged the fundamental realities of urban geometry, and each relied on “new” technologies and/or road investments that fundamentally cannot move as many people as efficiently and affordably as transit can.⁴⁵

NoTax4Tracks was funded in part and managed by local businesspeople Mark Bloom, Joe Scarlett, and Lee Beaman, the latter of whom served as the campaign’s treasurer at the time of launch (he was succeeded by Waymon Tipton of local wealth management firm Avondale Partners). Their views aligned with other prominent local voices, including Metro councilmember-at-large John Cooper, David Fox—Mayor Barry’s opponent in the 2015 run-off election for mayor—and Malcolm Getz, a transit critic and professor of economics at Vanderbilt University.⁴⁶ Cooper and Getz each spoke frequently at public events during the campaign, and Fox broke his media silence to vocally critique the plan.⁴⁷

NoTax4Tracks hired consultant Jeff Eller to manage its campaign and local civic advocate jeff obafemi carr as a strategist and chief spokesperson. Eller advised his funders—most of whom remained anonymous—that the odds were against them given Mayor Barry’s popularity and Transit for Nashville’s well-funded campaign, with the implication that NoTax4Tracks should be wary of throwing too much money down the drain.

The odds quickly reversed when Mayor Barry announced an affair with her former bodyguard on January 31, one week prior to the Metro Council’s final vote on placing the *Let’s Move Nashville* plan on the May ballot. This announcement was followed by six weeks of uncertainty in the Barry administration, as the mayor and her close advisors scrambled to find a path forward. The mayor ultimately resigned on March 6, when she pled guilty to felony theft related to charges of spending taxpayer dollars on expenses related to the affair. The largest barrier facing the opposition campaign—the mayor’s high profile and popularity—collapsed.

Metro Council Gives an Amended Green Light

In the week following the mayor’s January 31 announcement, members of the Metro Council consulted with chamber leadership about whether to table the referendum vote. The chamber wanted to press ahead, and on February 6 the council voted overwhelmingly in favor of moving forward with the referendum—but not without amending the referendum language.

45 “Robot Cars vs. Transit,” TransitCenter, <https://transitcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/RobotCars.pdf>

46 Meg Garner, “Vanderbilt professor: Barry’s \$5.4 billion mass-transit plan won’t meet expectations,” *Nashville Business Journal*, January 2, 2018, <https://www.bizjournals.com/nashville/news/2018/01/02/vanderbilt-professor-barrys-5-4-billion-mass.html>

47 Meg Garner, “‘Borderline Catastrophic’: David Fox Comes Out Swinging Against Mayor Barry’s Plan,” *Nashville Business Journal*, January 17, 2018, <https://www.bizjournals.com/nashville/news/2018/01/17/borderline-catastrophic-david-fox-speaks-out.html>

The mayor's scandal greatly slowed Transit for Nashville's operations.

- 48 NoTax4Tracks, "Taxville," YouTube video, 0:30, February 19, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7THaZg1jrRQ&feature=youtu.be>
- 49 NoTax4Tracks, "Vote Against the Transit Plan on May 1," YouTube video, 1:00, April 3, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZXxx7JPhb0&feature=youtu.be>
- 50 Local NPR affiliate WPLN fact-checked this and other opposition claims, concluding that the \$43,000 claim was highly dependent on modeling assumptions. Tony Gonzalez, "Fact-Checking Nashville's Transit Debate: A False Ad Retracted, and Other Math Battles," *Nashville Public Radio*, April 6, 2018, <https://www.nashvillepublicradio.org/post/fact-checking-nashville-s-transit-debate-false-ad-retracted-and-other-math-battles#stream/0>
- 51 Peter J. Haas et al., *Why Campaigns for Local Transportation Initiatives Succeed or Fail: An Analysis of Four Communities and National Data* (San Jose, CA: Mineta Transportation Institute, 2000), <https://transweb.sjsu.edu/sites/default/files/00-01.pdf>
- 52 NoTax4Tracks, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/pg/NoTax4Tracks/videos/>

A discrepancy between two cost estimates for the *Let's Move Nashville* plan had become a source of intense public debate. Transit for Nashville's go-to number for the overall cost—\$5.4 billion, reflecting the plan's total capital investments in 2017 dollars—was significantly less than the total cost through 2032 inclusive of operations, maintenance, and bond repayment, which was estimated at \$8.9 billion. Opponents used this discrepancy to undermine Transit for Nashville's credibility.

The council was voting in part on the specific language—less than 250 words, as required by the IMPROVE Act—that would appear on voters' ballots. At the third and final reading, the five at-large members sponsored and passed an amendment adding the \$8.9 billion figure, a specific reference to the downtown tunnel, and a few other linguistic changes intended to clarify and reduce perceived bias in the ballot language.

February–April 2018: The Opposition Seizes Its Moment

The implications of the mayor's scandal, the uncertainty that ensued, and her eventual resignation are far-reaching. While Barry's future as mayor remained in question, her policy agenda was deferred, all but ensuring, for example, that the recommendations of the Transit and Affordability Taskforce would not be implemented before the referendum. Barry's charisma, vision, and trust in her staff had inspired fierce loyalty, and her resignation triggered a commensurate drop in morale.

The scandal greatly slowed Transit for Nashville's operations. Several of the campaign's key staff were also some of the mayor's closest advisors, and during the six weeks between her public announcement and resignation, they were absorbed in controlling the political crisis and neglected the transit campaign.

During these six weeks, NoTax4Tracks launched its first campaign ad, beating Transit for Nashville onto the airwaves by a full two weeks with a message focused on tax increases.⁴⁸ The group's second ad⁴⁹ asserted that Nashville households would pay an additional \$43,000 in taxes if the referendum passed⁵⁰ and targeted seniors, a group that stood to benefit significantly from the plan's investments in paratransit and fixed-route service and whose support has been critical to previous transit funding efforts.⁵¹

On NoTax4Tracks's Facebook page, carr uploaded low production-value videos critiquing the plan,⁵² which garnered online views on the same order of magnitude as fully produced Transit for Nashville's

paid advertisements. NoTax4Tracks gained this advantage despite Transit for Nashville's six-month head start and considerable fundraising advantage. (Transit for Nashville ultimately spent more than \$3 million, while NoTax4Tracks spent approximately \$1 million.)

The Transit for Nashville messaging strategy relied heavily on Mayor Barry. The mayor's resignation forced campaign staff to engage more directly with the plan's details, much to the delight of their NoTax4Tracks counterparts, for whom "read the plan" had become a common refrain. Transit for Nashville also had to cut and reshoot TV ads that had featured Mayor Barry.

Interim Mayor David Briley (vice mayor during the Barry administration) had been a public supporter since the plan's launch. In a thirteen-person field running to replace Barry in a May 24 special election, Briley was the only candidate to support the transit referendum (he would go on to win easily). But Briley's support was relatively tepid, reflecting the fact that his campaign polling now indicated the referendum was likely to fail.

Organized referendum opposition and anonymous social media accounts⁵³ put supporters on the defensive with messages designed to amplify voters' skepticism. NoTax4Tracks emphasized the plan's cost, the inequity of relying on the sales tax, and the difference between the \$5.4 and \$8.9 billion cost estimates. Focus groups held relatively late in the campaign also prompted NoTax4Tracks to falsely tell prospective voters that none of the plan's investment would go toward road improvements, even though significant road and traffic signal technology improvements were included in the proposed plan—both along major transit corridors and in surrounding neighborhoods—to improve safety and access.

Transit for Nashville's public opinion polls showed that the biggest drop in support occurred after Mayor Barry's resignation, suggesting that many voters were anxious about a perceived lack of city leadership to move the plan forward if it were to pass.

Late in the campaign and in its immediate aftermath, supporters emphasized the role that anonymous campaign donations, or "dark money," played in the opposition campaign. A widely read *New York Times* article that headlined the role of the Koch brothers amplified this speculation,⁵⁴ but senior campaign staff on both sides of the *Let's Move Nashville* referendum do not believe that the Koch organization made significant financial contributions to the NoTax4Tracks campaign. Instead, interviewees believed that the bulk of the donations to Nashville Smart, Inc.—the anonymous super PAC responsible for about 75 percent of NoTax4Tracks's donations—came from local donors.

53 Jeremy Elrod (@jeremyelrod26), Twitter, March 13, 2018, 9:37 a.m., <https://twitter.com/JeremyElrod26/status/973553632221323264>

54 Hiroko Tabuchi, "How the Koch Brothers Are Killing Public Transit Projects Around the Country," *New York Times*, June 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/19/climate/koch-brothers-public-transit.html>



"They get the light rail, we get the bus and the bill."

The opposition campaign knew that Transit for Nashville would need the African American vote to win the May election. In polling conducted before her scandal, Mayor Barry still enjoyed strong favorability among African American Nashvillians. Still, NoTax4Tracks recognized that the Barry administration had alienated African American residents through its handling of the Clemmons shooting aftermath and the proposals for YMCA ownership transfer,

Cloud Hill development, and General Hospital funding withdrawal.

NoTax4Tracks set out to take advantage of that weakness and drive up skepticism in the African American community. The opposition campaign used targeted media purchases, messages designed to foster distrust in the transit plan, and—in Jeff Obafemi Carr—a perfectly chosen spokesperson to deliver those messages. In addition to TV ads designed to stoke anti-tax sentiment, NoTax4Tracks focused its media buys on African American radio and print outlets and opinion pieces in the Tennessee Tribune, a local African American newspaper.

In conversations with predominantly African American audiences, Carr—who is African American—emphasized Metro Nashville's history of neglecting people of color and painted Let's Move Nashville as more of the same: an opportunity for the rich to get richer, at the expense of working-class people and people of color. He adeptly drew connections between the plan's price tag, regressive sales tax, lack of congestion relief, and an overall implication that working-class Nashvillians would be subsidizing light rail improvements for tourists and newcomers.

He frequently repeated a slogan designed to encapsulate this message: "They get the light rail, we get the bus and the bill." Well-versed in the plan's details, Carr, a trained actor, often outmaneuvered Transit for Nashville spokespeople with his ability to recite in-the-weeds financial and operating statistics, while others read from prepared notes.

Driving up skepticism in the African American community was the final pillar of the NoTax4Tracks strategy. African American community leaders who might have helped combat these messages either stayed on the sidelines of the public debate or ultimately opposed the plan.

Beyond NoTax4Tracks, critiques of the plan took several forms:

- A process critique, citing a lack of public outreach
- Concern about the short-term congestion impacts of major construction, especially among the downtown tourism industry
- Concerns about housing affordability, both from the perspective that Nashville should invest in housing before transit, and from the perspective that light rail would accelerate gentrification
- A critique that the light rail system was too small, "didn't help me," or was "not regional"
- The perception of light rail as an "outdated" technology

Late in the campaign and in its immediate aftermath, supporters emphasized the role that anonymous campaign donations, or “dark money,” played in the opposition campaign.

As the *Times* article reports, the Koch-funded group Americans for Prosperity provided support in a different and still valuable form: access to its voter identification database. Voter ID databases allow campaigns to more carefully target their door-knocking and direct-mail outreach efforts. The Koch organization also provides support to the Beacon Center of Tennessee and the *Tennessee Star* news website, which opposed *Let’s Move Nashville*.

Even so, while its efforts may have drawn on a less sophisticated voter ID database, the Transit for Nashville campaign still knocked on approximately 60,000 doors—an order of magnitude higher than the approximately 6,000 doors that Americans for Prosperity did, according to the *Times*.

Transit for Nashville’s lead strategists wanted to present the referendum as a choice between less traffic or more traffic, but by the end of the race campaign spokespeople were positioning the choice as being for or against public transit. Skepticism even among transit supporters created fertile ground for NoTax4Tracks to ask why Nashville couldn’t wait for another plan to be developed. Those involved in the Transit for Nashville campaign argued—based largely on the chamber’s interpretation of other cities’ experiences—that it would take five to ten years to bring another proposal to voters.

May Day

Polls run by David Briley’s special election campaign after Mayor Barry’s resignation showed a sharp drop in support for the transit plan, but the final returns were even worse than those polls had indicated: 64 percent of 125,000 voters cast their votes against the plan. Support eroded quickly during the campaign’s final months—the plan had polled with more than 50 percent support as late as January 2018.

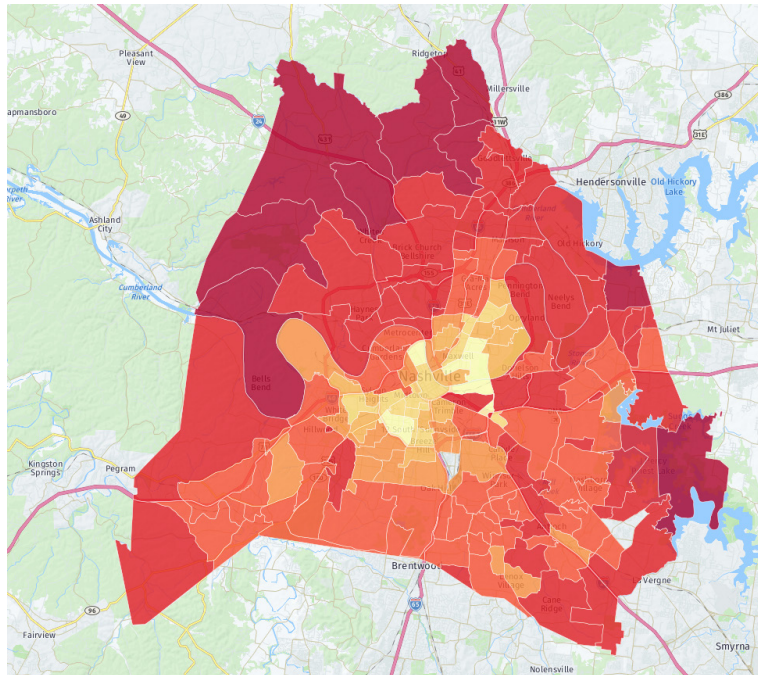
Support was overwhelmingly concentrated in the center of the county, where the benefits were most intuitively obvious—“for” voters were a majority in only six of thirty-five Metro Council districts.⁵⁵ With the exception of Nashville’s District 24, all of the May 2018 election’s highest-turnout council districts voted overwhelmingly against the plan, according to analysis by Harpeth Strategies, a political consultancy run by Metro Councilmember Dave Rosenberg.⁵⁶ These high-turnout districts—among the county’s wealthiest and least racially diverse—supplied more than a quarter of early votes.⁵⁷ Opposition was also acute in districts with a high share of African American residents, who are concentrated near central Nashville and in the northwestern and southwestern parts of the county.

55 Dave Rosenberg (@DaveRosenbergTN), Twitter, May 2, 2018, 10:45 p.m., <https://twitter.com/DaveRosenbergTN/status/991871347470098432?s=20>

56 Dave Rosenberg (@DaveRosenbergTN), Twitter, May 2, 2018, 11:01 p.m., <https://twitter.com/DaveRosenbergTN/status/991875479748730880?s=20>

57 Dave Rosenberg (@DaveRosenbergTN), Twitter, April 26, 2018, 10:47 p.m., <https://twitter.com/DaveRosenbergTN/status/989697485005381632?s=20>

**Precinct-level voter map:
darker red represents a larger
proportion of votes cast
against the transit initiative
on Election Day.⁵⁸**



Among early voters, Democrats were about as likely to vote for as against, though voters ages eighteen to forty-nine supported *Let's Move Nashville*.⁵⁹ Overall turnout was much higher than predicted, with more than 125,000 Davidson County residents casting votes—nearly 60,000 during early voting—out of approximately 400,000 registered voters. With an overall turnout of more than 30 percent, this election looked more like a statewide election year (which typically sees turnout of approximately 40 percent) than a typical May election (which typically sees turnout of approximately 10 percent).

The chamber of commerce's post-referendum polling suggested that approximately 45,000 voters—more than one-third of total turnout—had been modeled as low-likelihood voters in Transit for Nashville's modeling. The same polls indicated that these “unexpected” voters were overwhelmingly worried about the potential financial burden on Metro Nashville and the lack of Metro leadership or ability to implement the plan.

Some political observers in Nashville–Davidson County interpreted the election results to suggest that transit is not a winning issue, but the chamber's post-election polling contradicts this view. It suggests that transportation remains a top priority for more than three-quarters of Nashville voters and that they would like to see another plan with measures to create dedicated funding.

58 Joey Garrison, “Interactive map: A sweeping loss for Nashville transit referendum everywhere but city's core,” *Tennessean*, May 3, 2018, <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/2018/05/03/interactive-map-see-how-nashville-tn-transit-vote-lost-election-results/573756002/>

59 Dave Rosenberg (@DaveRosenbergTN), Twitter, May 1, 2018, 8:14 p.m., <https://twitter.com/DaveRosenbergTN/status/991470859956211713?s=20>

The Campaign, in Retrospect

It is easy to blame the mayor's unfortunately timed scandal, the opposition's fact-bending messages, or even the Koch brothers' voter identification database for the referendum's failure. Indeed, the mayor's scandal and resignation may have been enough to doom the *Let's Move Nashville* vote.

But the extraordinary margin of defeat strongly suggests that many dynamics were at play. Those hoping to learn from it must examine the full breadth of factors contributing to the referendum's failure, focusing on what Mayor Barry and the Transit for Nashville campaign could control.



While Transit for Nashville consultants and spokespeople delivered scripted messages in line with the campaign's strategy, NoTax4Tracks's jeff carr spoke with ease in prepared and off-the-cuff remarks.

Don't take key constituencies for granted in your campaign plan

Several people interviewed for this case study believe that the campaign was on track to fail as early as the mayor's November announcement about ceasing inpatient services at Nashville General Hospital. This was the last in a string of announcements that alienated African American Nashvillians, whose importance as a transit voting bloc was amplified by the mayor's choice to hold the referendum in May 2018. While major drops in African American support were not seen in polling results until after the mayor's March resignation, this series of decisions made voters more skeptical of the transit plan and more receptive to the opposition's messages.

The disconnect between the mayor's actions and the strategic importance of African American voters was paralleled by the Transit for Nashville campaign. Like the mayor's team during the *Let's Move Nashville* planning process, the lead Transit for Nashville consultants had not included people of color in senior decision-making roles during the campaign planning process. The campaign manager—a person of color—was hired as a senior decision-maker, but only after the campaign strategy had been developed. The campaign treated African American voters like any other “interest group,” despite their outsized role in deciding previous May elections in Nashville.

Build flexibility into your campaign to make sure you can learn and adapt to changing circumstances

In their efforts to stick to the campaign strategy, Transit for Nashville leadership failed to adjust as new information became available. By the time campaign leaders acknowledged the magnitude of their problems in the African American community, it was likely too late. While Transit for Nashville consultants and spokespeople delivered scripted messages in line with the campaign's strategy, NoTax4Tracks's jeff carr spoke with ease in prepared and off-the-cuff remarks.

Some campaign consultants perceived that the campaign was losing ground in African American and Latinx communities. Those consultants raised their concerns to the campaign's management team only to feel like their ideas were being shot down or ignored. These experiences were emblematic of what campaign staff and volunteers described as a top-down campaign structure, in which their expertise was not solicited, acknowledged, or employed.

Align campaign organizing and leadership structure with strategic goals

Without the chamber's advocacy and fundraising efforts, the referendum may never have happened and the IMPROVE Act might never have included provisions enabling a transit vote in the first place.

The Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce coordinated with the mayor's office and was the engine behind the Transit for Nashville campaign. Without the chamber's advocacy and fundraising efforts, the referendum may never have happened and the IMPROVE Act might never have included provisions enabling a transit vote in the first place.

The chamber had done exhaustive research in anticipation of the campaign, including a review and synthesis of lessons learned from twenty-five previous transit referendums and various Nashville-specific research that informed the early strategy of the mayor's office and the campaign.

The chamber's institutional blind spots, however, hampered the coalition and campaign efforts. Since the chamber hired and oversaw the Transit for Nashville campaign staff, it is thus ultimately accountable for management of the campaign. While the chamber was not generally involved in the campaign's day-to-day activities, it still missed several opportunities to ensure that the campaign put itself in a position to win. For example, the chamber could have formed a more ideologically and racially diverse steering committee to guide the campaign's strategy, ensured that more diverse voices were included in the campaign's management, or acted more urgently in response to early coalition member concerns.

The chamber also could have designed consultant contracts to include stronger incentives for winning the campaign and for overall financial efficiency. PR agencies are not typically well suited to run political campaigns, both because of their hourly billing structure and lack of both issue- and campaign-specific expertise. In retrospect, paid and volunteer campaign members view Transit for Nashville as consultant- and paid media-heavy, likely at the expense of direct voter outreach. This may have increased the margin of defeat in outlying areas of Davidson County in particular.

Build an independent and inclusive pro-transit coalition

The chamber might have been better off ceding more decision-making responsibility to coalition partners. Businesses cannot vote, so the chamber needed its coalition partners to help mobilize the people of Nashville. It had counted on Mayor Barry to lead that mobilization, a strategy that seemed sound at the time but ultimately backfired. A coalition independent from the campaign, or with leaders empowered to directly inform campaign strategy, could have mitigated the fallout from Mayor Barry's scandal and resignation.

The chamber's role at the top of the campaign created an optics problem for both the campaign and the coalition. While the chamber



was perceived as a relatively trustworthy institution in early campaign public opinion polling, the opposition campaign and other skeptics cited the chamber's role to suggest that the campaign was driven by and for the benefit of Nashville elites. Several potential coalition members balked at the fact that chamber member CoreCivic—a national, for-profit prison owner/operator—was a coalition member. The chamber declined to exclude this company from the coalition, citing its financial contributions to the campaign.

Diversifying campaign and coalition leadership would have required the chamber to voluntarily give up some of its own power. Much of that power derived from the chamber's outsized role in funding the campaign effort—it raised all but a fraction of 1 percent of Transit for Nashville's budget. The Transit for Nashville coalition was both organized by chamber staff and run by the chamber-funded campaign, and the appointed coalition "co-chairs," representing key community organizations, were assigned roles as spokespeople, not leaders.

Build a diverse bench of spokespeople and plan for a scrappy and organized opposition

Interviewees skeptical of the plan almost uniformly perceived Jeff Carr to be the most trusted voice during the referendum despite the

The plan's transportation benefits would likely have accrued predominantly to working-class people and people of color, but good-faith critics of the plan pointed out that it was not designed to maximize these benefits.

NoTax4Tracks campaign's often-disingenuous messaging. NoTax4Tracks and allied referendum opponents peddled false messages about light rail or public transit more generally being “outdated technology,” inflated the plan's cost estimates, misled voters about the plan's roadway investments, and promoted and published opinion pieces under fake names.⁶⁰ This may be the new norm for transit campaigns in major US cities and must be anticipated.

Once Mayor Barry was sidelined, the Transit for Nashville campaign had no spokespeople whose messages resonated with voters the way Carr's did. Only after Mayor Barry's scandal broke did it become apparent how shallow Transit for Nashville's bench of spokespeople was. The chamber and campaign leadership struggled to find a new face—or faces—of the referendum.

Place equity at the heart of the plan's design

Nashville is nearly 30 percent African American yet has never had an African American mayor. One of the city's largest transportation infrastructure projects, Interstate 40, runs straight through a historically African American neighborhood⁶¹ despite lawsuits brought by local activists to stop the project in the 1960s.⁶² The benefits of Nashville's recent and rapid growth have not accrued to working-class Nashvillians or Nashvillians of color to the degree they have for wealthier, whiter Nashvillians, and housing-cost growth has dramatically outpaced wage growth. Traffic continues to worsen, while affordable alternatives to driving alone, including transit, remain inconvenient or unsafe.

With this history in mind, it was telling that affordable housing overtook traffic as Nashvillians' number-one concern in January 2018 public opinion polling. The plan's light rail-heavy budget stoked fears of gentrification and displacement. The chamber's dominant role in the Transit for Nashville campaign made many observers suspect the plan was driven by business leaders and real estate speculators, rather than by an overriding interest in improving transportation access. These concerns were held even among strong referendum supporters and senior staff on the Transit for Nashville campaign.

The plan's transportation benefits would likely have accrued predominantly to working-class people and people of color, but good-faith critics of the plan pointed out that it was not designed to maximize these benefits. Equity-promoting aspects of the plan like reduced fares for low-income riders and improved AccessRide service were a tiny portion of the budget.

The procedure of developing the planning and campaign strategies

60 Adam Tamburin, “Group Opposing Nashville Transit Plan Used Fake Name, Unauthorized Photo in Opinion Piece,” *Tennessean*, April 9, 2018, <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/2018/04/09/nashville-transit-plan-opinion-fake-name-photo/501080002/>

61 “An African American Community's Fight Over I-40,” *Tennessee 4 Me*, Tennessee State Museum, http://www.tn4me.org/sapage.cfm/sa_id/248/era_id/8/major_id/12/minor_id/9/a_id/172

62 Sabre J. Rucker, “The Highway to Segregation” (master's thesis, Vanderbilt University, 2016), <https://etd.library.vanderbilt.edu/available/etd-04202016-073836/unrestricted/Rucker.pdf>



Many of Nashville's "Pikes" offer poor walking conditions.

was also inequitable by virtue of failing to include a sufficiently broad range of perspectives among decision-makers. Members of the planning team did fight for increased operating funds for the bus system, and the mayor herself insisted on the addition of the Northwest light rail corridor to bring light rail service into North Nashville, but voters ultimately perceived that these additions did not go far enough.

Treating equity as a core design principle would have been the right thing to do and strategically advantageous for both the mayor's office and the chamber of commerce.

Set the narrative with clear, consistent messaging, and focus on the plan's likely benefits

The Transit for Nashville campaign's messaging was reactive, muddled, and inconsistent, which eroded trust in multiple ways. Transit for Nashville forfeited a nearly six-month head start when NoTax4Tracks ran the election's first TV advertisements, putting *Let's Move Nashville* supporters on the defensive.

Transit for Nashville's central promise was that the *Let's Move Nashville* plan would reduce traffic. The lead campaign consultants chose this message because it polled extremely well, and because polling also suggested that voters would respond more positively to vague messages about the plan's benefits rather than the plan's specifics. In this case, the campaign's desire for simplicity obscured the vulnerability of the emphasis on traffic.

Opponents repeatedly argued, disingenuously, that bus improvements would not provide Nashvillians with alternatives to sitting in traffic and that the referendum would not fund any "highway or road expansion" improvements. These opposition messages undermined referendum supporters who stayed "on-message" with traffic-reduction talking points, and made the campaign look disorganized when referendum supporters acknowledged that an improved transit system would not, in fact, reduce traffic. Combined with controversy about the discrepancy between the \$5.4 and \$8.9 billion cost estimates, this allowed opponents to undermine Transit for Nashville's credibility.

Focusing almost exclusively on traffic misses the opportunity to promote transit's most valuable and indisputable benefits—giving people a more affordable transportation option and eliminating the stress of driving commutes—both of which especially help working-class residents, older residents, and residents with disabilities. The second part of the campaign's slogan—"more time for what matters"—captured some of this spirit, and Mayor Barry emphasized the



plan's equity benefits early on, but over the course of the campaign these messages were drowned out by the focus on traffic.

Public opinion data is valuable, but it must be interpreted carefully. While voters responded more favorably to vague messages than to the specifics of the *Let's Move Nashville* plan, that may have foreshadowed that specific aspects of the plan would in fact prove unpopular. When transportation experts expressed reservations about messages emphasizing traffic reduction, campaign PR experts dismissed these concerns rather than trying to understand the implications. Polling is only one data source among many, and others—including expert opinion and qualitative analysis—can offer important insights.

The campaign also struggled to convince voters that this plan could make a dent in traffic that Metro Nashville residents perceived (rightly or wrongly) as a problem largely caused by neighboring counties. This challenge won't go away, but the plan's particularly large price tag made the campaign's claim that *Let's Move Nashville* was "only a first step" ring hollow.

More broadly, people engaged in the campaign felt that Transit for Nashville's messages and emphasis would change from meeting to meeting, which NoTax4Tracks seized upon in public forums. This might have been mitigated with better preparation for campaign spokespeople, but many of those spokespeople were diverted in the middle of the campaign by the mayor's scandal.

When transportation experts expressed reservations about messages emphasizing traffic reduction, campaign PR experts dismissed these concerns rather than trying to understand the implications. Polling is only one data source among many, and others—including expert opinion and qualitative analysis—can offer important insights.

Conclusion

The Barry administration put together the biggest plan it felt it could pass, and the chamber of commerce put its full weight behind the Transit for Nashville campaign. But on election day, most Nashville voters did not feel that this plan aligned with their priorities.



Advocates and leaders should take extra care to stress-test their plans with a diverse set of stakeholders and community members during the early stages of their planning process.

A handful of unique circumstances eroded support for the plan, most notably the mayor's scandal and resignation. Still, the lopsided results and the interviews conducted for this case study strongly suggest that both the plan itself and ensuing campaign were built on unstable strategic foundations.

The failure of the *Let's Move Nashville* referendum is an unequivocal setback for Nashville's transportation system and will be an important cautionary tale for transit advocates and city leaders across the country.

It also offers an array of valuable lessons for advocates, elected officials, and agency staff alike. Chief among these lessons, advocates and leaders should take extra care to stress-test their plans with a diverse set of stakeholders and community members during the early stages of their planning processes. Winning a transit referendum is hard work—in most US cities, passing one requires getting a majority of voters to increase their own taxes to pay for a system that benefits everyone but will be used only by a minority of voters.

Equity concerns will look different in every city depending on what challenges its residents face—but these challenges must be acknowledged and proactively incorporated into successful plans. Thoughtful consideration should be made to ensure equity is a core design criterion in the plan's development process, in its funding structure, and in the benefits created by the plan's ultimate implementation. These considerations will make the resulting plans stronger, easier to convey, and more likely to gain support.

Ballot measures will continue to be an essential tool for raising long-term funding to support public transit in the US. Nashville's referendum does not offer a roadmap to success, but it nonetheless offers many lessons, positive and negative, for civic leaders to learn from as they seek to scale up their communities' transit investments.

Epilogue

What Comes Next for Nashville Transit?

Nashville's leaders will have to go back to the drawing board to determine a more resilient path to dedicated funding for their transit system, but there are ample reasons to be hopeful.

Some Nashvillians are likely to oppose transit funding no matter what, but chamber of commerce and campaign polling prior to the referendum pegged that number at about 30 percent of Nashville residents. A multimodal plan with a broad base of community support,⁶³ run in a high-turnout election, and perhaps without the specter of a high-profile mayoral scandal, could thus have more than enough room to earn passage among Nashville's electorate.



What would it look like for transit advocates, elected officials, and agency staff in Nashville to implement the lessons learned from the *Let's Move Nashville* referendum?

The Transit for Nashville coalition has reformed as Connect Mid-TN.⁶⁴ Recent municipal elections yielded a new council and a new mayor, John Cooper⁶⁵—who vocally opposed *Let's Move Nashville* but endorsed the Nashville Community Transportation Platform, a community-organization-backed proposal to improve citywide bus service, expand walking and biking networks, reduce traffic deaths, and dedicate funding to transit.⁶⁶ There is reason for hope but also uncertainty regarding the prospects for new transit funding in Nashville. With a massive budget cut now on the books for WeGo Transit, the need for sustained investment in transit operations has never been greater.⁶⁷

What would it look like for transit advocates, elected officials, and agency staff in Nashville to implement the lessons learned from the *Let's Move Nashville* referendum?

Advocates

- Focus on building resilient, long-term transit advocacy infrastructure: if not developing a formal coalition, then developing strong ties with allied groups, especially those with the ability to mobilize voters and/or other key stakeholders, and cultivating relationships with the reporters who cover city politics and/or transportation specifically.
- Hold elected officials accountable for delivering on existing promises to ensure near-term wins and to build a public understanding of what useful transit looks like.

Elected officials

- Direct agency staff to undertake a new round of community conversations that focus on understanding residents' and transit riders' near-term priorities for improving transportation access.
- Identify and pursue immediate, low-cost opportunities to improve the public transit system in visible ways while continuing to publicly stress the need for a sustainable, long-term funding source.
- Seek out meetings to rebuild and strengthen relationships with key stakeholders in advance of a potential future referendum.

Transportation agency staff

- Make clear in private and in public what the benefits of dedicated funding would be to your operations and how this affects your agency today.
- Implement community engagement practices designed to proactively identify and respond to community needs, thereby fostering long-term trust.
- Work proactively to communicate the connection between desired transit improvements and the challenges and needs your constituents are facing—including affordable housing, changing land-use patterns, and inequality.

63 Advocacy Advance, *Success at the Ballot Box: Winning Bicycle-Pedestrian Ballot Measures* (Washington, DC: Advocacy Advance, 2013), http://bikeleague.org/sites/default/files/ballot_web_1.pdf

64 "Improving Transportation Access for All," Connect Mid-TN, <https://www.connectmidtn.org/>

65 "Nashville mayor and council runoff election results," *Tennessean*, Sept. 12, 2019, <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/politics/2019/09/12/election-results-nashville-mayor-council-race/2276612001/>

66 "Making Nashville a Safer and More Equitable Place to Get Around," Nashville Community Transportation Platform, <https://www.nashvilletransportation.org/>

67 WeGo Public Transit, "Nashville MTA Board Approves of WeGo Service Changes, Fare Increases," press release, June 27, 2019, <https://www.nashvillemta.org/News/news1018.pdf>

Appendix

Timeline

2010

December

Nashville Area Metropolitan Planning Organization adopts the 2035 Regional Transportation Plan, containing the first-ever regional vision for transit services to connect Middle Tennessee's ten counties and including a call to establish dedicated transit funding for capital and operations.⁶⁸

2011

December

Initial "East-West Connector" study published, ultimately leading to the rapid bus project that would later come to be known as the "Amp."⁶⁹

2015

January

Amp project is discontinued by Mayor Karl Dean's administration in the face of public and Tennessee General Assembly opposition.⁷⁰

April

Nashville MTA kicks off *nMotion 2015*, the regional strategic planning process of the Nashville MTA (and RTA). Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce announces parallel Moving Forward effort led by regional business leaders, designed in large part to influence the MTA process.

68 Nashville Area Metropolitan Planning Association, "Mayors Adopt New Transportation Plan for Middle Tennessee," press release, December 15, 2010, <http://www.nashvillempo.org/docs/RELEASE-%2012%2015%2010%20MPO%20Mayors%20Adopt%202035%20Regional%20Transportation%20Plan.pdf>

69 Nashville MTA, *The East-West Connector: Smart Transit for Nashville's Future* (2013), <http://www.nashvillemta.org/pdf/fn23.pdf>

70 Steven Hale, "A Messy Fight Looms Over the Amp, Metro's Proposed Bus Rapid Transit System," Nashville Scene, November 7, 2013, <https://www.nashvillescene.com/news/article/13051278/a-messy-fight-looms-over-the-amp-metros-proposed-bus-rapid-transit-system>

71 "NashvilleNext – Moving Forward," Metro Government of Nashville and Davidson County, <https://www.nashville.gov/Government/NashvilleNext.aspx>

72 Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce, *Moving Forward: Transit Solutions for Our Region*, 2016 Report, https://s3.amazonaws.com/nashvillechamber.com/PDFs/moving_forward_annual_report_2016_web_v2.pdf

73 City of Nashville, Urban Land Institute Nashville, and Gabe Klein, *Gear Up 2020: Rapid Goal Setting for a 21st Century Nashville* (2016), <https://www.nashville.gov/Portals/0/SiteContent/MayorsOffice/Sustainability/docs/Gear-Up-2020-Final-Revised-8.8.16.pdf>

June

NashvilleNext long-range plan formally adopted by Metro Nashville Planning Commission, providing the foundational land-use guidelines upon which the *nMotion* regional transit plan will be built.⁷¹

September 10

Megan Barry is elected mayor of Nashville.

2016

January 21

Nashville MTA unveils three broad *nMotion* scenarios to guide the city's future transit investments. The first is light rail–focused but also includes bus rapid transit (BRT), rapid bus, local bus improvements, and other rail options, with an estimated \$5.4B price tag. The second would provide similar service levels via buses only, including BRT, freeway BRT, rapid bus, express bus on shoulder, and local service improvements, with an estimated \$2.4B price tag. The third scenario proposes modest low-cost improvements: rapid bus, express bus on shoulder, and local bus improvements, with a price tag of \$0.8B.

June

Moving Forward releases report asking Nashville MTA/RTA to adopt *nMotion's* most ambitious transit investment scenario.⁷²

July

Metro Nashville/Urban Land Institute/Gabe Klein *Gear Up 2020* study published, including transportation system recommendations.⁷³

Appendix

74 Todd Litman, *Evaluating Middle Tennessee Region Public Transportation Funding Sources*, (Victoria, BC: Victoria Transport Policy Institute, 2016), https://s3.amazonaws.com/nashvillechamber.com/PDFs/110916+Nashville_Moving+Forward+Report.pdf

75 Metro Government of Nashville and Davidson County, *WalknBike: Strategic Plan for Sidewalks and Bikeways* (2017), <https://www.nashville.gov/Portals/0/SiteContent/pw/docs/transportation/WalknBike/WalknBikeFinalPlan.pdf>

76 H.B. 0534, Session of 2017 (Tenn. 2017), <http://wapp.capitol.tn.gov/apps/BillInfo/default.aspx?BillNumber=HB0534&ga=110>

77 Mayor Megan Barry, 54th Annual State of Metro Address, April 26, 2017, <https://www.nashville.gov/Portals/0/SiteContent/MayorsOffice/State%20of%20Metro%202017%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

September

After a 30-day public comment period, the Regional Transportation Authority (Sept. 27) and the Nashville Metropolitan Transit Authority (Sept. 28) vote to adopt the most ambitious *nMotion* transit scenario, "Scenario 1." This 25-year vision includes an assortment of transit projects in Middle Tennessee.

November

Moving Forward releases a transit-revenue study, *Evaluating Middle Tennessee Region Public Transportation Funding Sources* by Todd Litman of the Victoria Transport Policy Institute.⁷⁴

2017

January

Release of sidewalks/bikeways master plan, *WalknBike*.⁷⁵

April

Governor Bill Haslam signs into law the IMPROVE Act, which increases the gas tax, reduces a number of other taxes, and allows counties and cities above certain population thresholds to raise dedicated funding for future transit projects through public referendums.⁷⁶

Mayor Megan Barry announces in her State of Metro address that the city will begin work to implement light rail service on the Gallatin Pike Corridor. Mayor Barry also announces her intention to initiate a Davidson County transit referendum in 2018.⁷⁷

78 Office of the Mayor, Megan Barry, *Moving the Music City: Nashville & Davidson County's 2017–2020 Transportation Action Agenda*, https://www.nashville.gov/Portals/0/SiteContent/MayorsOffice/Nashville_524171v01.pdf

79 "Moving Forward: Mobility Solutions for Our Region," Moving Forward, <https://www.movingforwardmidtn.com/>

80 Nashville MTA, *nMotion High Capacity Transit Briefing Book: Opportunities & Challenges* (2017), <http://139e83c06b-73767fe1d7-3a0b03ce-999659cce0d32d4cee74e7f8.r68.cf5.rackcdn.com/Nashville%20HCT%20Opps%20Briefing%20FINAL%20v2.pdf>

May

Mayor Barry publishes the Moving the Music City transportation action agenda for 2017–2020.⁷⁸ Metro Nashville also endorses Cloud Hill developers' plan to redevelop the old Greer Stadium property, creating backlash among historic preservationists, park/open-space advocates, and African American residents because of the likelihood of enslaved people being buried on the site. The Barry administration begins convening an internal group to design the referendum plan.

July

Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce issues RFP for transit referendum campaign consultants.

August

Moving Forward releases its 2017 report, *Nashville & Middle Tennessee County Transportation Revenue Forecasts*, including a county revenue forecast model.⁷⁹ Nashville MTA releases its *High Capacity Transit Briefing Book*, the final deliverable of the *nMotion* process, which finds no "fatal flaws" to developing high-capacity transit along five major corridors.⁸⁰

September

Launch of Transit for Nashville coalition at the Nashville Farmers' Market with thirty-seven coalition members and Mayor Barry. Transit for Nashville is "co-chaired" by Shelley Courington (AARP Tennessee), Clifton Harris (Urban League of Middle Tennessee) and Ethan Link (Southeast Laborers' District Council).

Appendix

81 Metro Government of Nashville and Davidson County, "Mayor Barry Announces That Analysis Shows Let's Move Nashville Will Create Thousands of Jobs, Produce Billions of Dollars in Local Economic Activity during Construction Period," press release, December 12, 2017, <https://www.nashville.gov/News-Media/News-Article/ID/7054/Mayor-Barry-Announces-That-Analysis-Shows-Lets-Move-Nashville-Will-Create-Thousands-of-Jobs-Produce-Billions-of-Dollars-in-Local-Economic-Activity-during-Construction-Period.aspx>

82 Metro Government of Nashville and Davidson County, "Transit and Affordability Taskforce Presents Final Recommendations to Mayor Megan Barry," press release, January 10, 2018, <https://www.nashville.gov/News-Media/News-Article/ID/7128/Transit-and-Affordability-Taskforce-Presents-Final-Recommendations-to-Mayor-Megan-Barry.aspx>

October

Mayor Barry announces her proposed transit investment plan for Davidson County, called *Let's Move Nashville*, including the funding proposal.

November

Mayor Barry announces an end to inpatient care at Nashville General Hospital, the only public hospital serving the historically African American North Nashville neighborhood.

December

Mayor Barry formally files legislation that triggers a public referendum on the May 1, 2018, ballot and releases the formal *Let's Move Nashville* transit improvement program, which is then verified by accounting firm KraftCPAs.


The Nashville Metro government releases an analysis showing the economic and employment impacts of *Let's Move Nashville*.⁸¹

2018

January

Public Hearing on the *Let's Move Nashville* transit improvement plan.

The mayor's Transit and Affordability Taskforce (led by former Mayor Bill Purcell and County Clerk Brenda Wynn) publishes recommendations to address gentrification and displacement concerns.⁸²



Mayor Barry and the Transit for Nashville coalition announce the coalition has collected over 30,000 signatures on a petition stating "I'm for transit, and I'm willing to help pay for it. We can't afford to wait."

Mayor Barry reverses her administration's previous stance on funding for Nashville General Hospital, and Cloud Hill developers withdraw their proposal for the Greer Stadium site.

The NoTax4Tracks opposition group launches.

On January 31, Mayor Barry announces her affair.

February

One week after Mayor Barry's announcement, the Metro Council votes 34–2 to put the *Let's Move Nashville* transit referendum on the ballot for the May 1, 2018, election. Council member-at-large John Cooper, with the support of the other four at-large council members, successfully introduced an amendment to the bill adding the sentence "and a total cost for the transit system of \$8,951,062,000" in addition to the \$5,354,000,000 cost of the transit system that was included in the original proposed ballot language.

Appendix

March

Mayor Barry resigns. David Briley is sworn in as Nashville's new mayor.

Mayors from adjacent counties and local unions endorse the *Let's Move Nashville* plan.

April

The Metro government releases white papers with triple bottom line (social, environmental, and financial) data analysis on the mobility and accessibility, health and safety, and population and employment benefits from implementing *Let's Move Nashville*.

Early voting period runs from April 11 to 26.

The *Nashville Business Journal* and *Tennessean* endorse the transit plan.




The Metro government releases an analysis of *Let's Move Nashville's* greenhouse gas-emission impact.⁸³

May 1

Election Day.

83 Metro Government of Nashville and Davidson County, "Mayor Briley Marks Earth Day by Announcing Let's Move Nashville is Equivalent to Planting 1 Million Trees," press release, April 21, 2018, <https://www.nashville.gov/News-Media/News-Article/ID/7443/Mayor-Briley-Marks-Earth-Day-by-Announcing-Lets-Move-Nashville-is-Equivalent-to-Planting-1-Million-Trees.aspx>

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