

Most still support transit sales tax

Money would pay for buses, rail

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By: Bruce Siceloff

Most Triangle voters are still willing to pay a half-penny sales tax for better bus and rail transit service - but support for the transit tax in Wake County has weakened - according the third yearly poll commissioned by a pro-transit business lobby.

The yes vote was 57 percent for Wake, Durham and Orange counties combined. That's down from 58 percent in 2010 but still higher than the 53 percent yes vote in 2009.

It probably didn't hurt, from the standpoint of transit boosters, that gas prices were soaring above \$3.50 a gallon as Ohio-based Fallon Research quizzed 904 registered voters between March 6 and March 9.

When the specter of even higher pump prices was raised, 23 percent of poll respondents said \$4 gas would make them more likely to favor a transit tax. And 31 percent said the same for - eek! - \$5 gas.

The poll was commissioned by the Regional Transportation Alliance, a nonprofit Triangle business group, which lobbies for transit and other transportation improvements. The group supports plans now being developed for bus improvements and light rail service that would be financed in part with proceeds from a proposed half-cent increase in local sales taxes.

Seven regional workshops are scheduled March 22-31 to update residents on bus and rail plans.

In Wake County, which has two-thirds of the region's voters, support for the transit tax fell from 55 percent in 2010 to 51 percent this year, according to the poll. Transit tax support increased in Durham County from 58 percent in 2010 to 60 percent this year, and dipped slightly in Orange County from 61 percent in 2010 to 59 percent this year.

"While support for the tax has gone down slightly in both Orange and Wake, the support for a sales tax remains above 50 percent in all counties," said Joe Milazzo II, executive director of the Regional Transportation Alliance.

Fallon said the margin of error was 3.25 percentage points for the three-county poll, and 5.7 percentage points for the results from individual counties.

When asked which type of transit improvements were important, 71 percent said they "totally favor" more buses and bus routes, and 77 percent "totally favor" trains. But, asked which they would prefer if they had to choose one or the other, 48 percent wanted more buses and 42 percent wanted trains.

County commissioners will decide whether to approve the transit plans and hold referendums on the transit tax. Wake commissioners won't hold a referendum before spring or fall 2012, but Orange and Durham boards have not ruled out a vote this fall.