

## **Transit plan to face critique 3 experts will offer feedback on proposal**

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RALEIGH Silent for two years since County Manager David Cooke rolled out an ambitious proposal for trains and buses and a new half-cent sales tax to help pay for them, Wake County commissioners finally are ready this week to begin discussing the Wake Transit Plan.

They've never talked with Cooke and the Triangle Transit planners who developed the 200-page plan, and they don't plan to now. Instead, they have invited three transit experts from Florida and Colorado to Raleigh for one day.

In a three-hour public meeting Tuesday at the Marbles Kids Museum, the commissioners will quiz their three panelists on issues involving the feasibility of a public transit system, how to pay for it and how to govern it.

The panelists, recruited by Cooke, are:

Cal Marsella, a consultant who served as general manager of the Denver Regional Transportation District from 1995 to 2009.

Steve E. Polzin, who directs a transit research program at the University of South Florida Center for Urban Transportation Research.

Sam R. Staley, managing director of the DeVoe L. Moore Center at Florida State University and a senior research fellow at the Los Angeles-based Reason Foundation, a libertarian think tank.

Cooke and Triangle Transit, the regional bus and planning agency, consulted officials in Wake's dozen towns and cities and coordinated their efforts with Orange and Durham counties when they developed the three-part Wake plan to:

Nearly double bus service over the first five years. The capital and operating costs were estimated in 2011 at \$329 million, with Wake's share \$139 million. Federal funds would pay much of the cost for new buses.

Launch a rush-hour commuter rail service for 37 miles from Duke University in Durham to Garner, including stops at Research Triangle Park, Cary, N.C. State University and downtown Raleigh. The capital cost was pegged at \$650 million, with Wake's share \$330 million.

Build a 14-mile light-rail line from downtown Cary through west and downtown Raleigh, then up to Millbrook Road in North Raleigh. The estimated cost was \$1.1 billion for construction and \$14 million for annual operations.

Cooke said in 2011 that Wake could confidently expect to start making the bus improvements and building the commuter train line if county commissioners and voters approved the proposed half-cent transit sales tax and other related fees to pay most of the cost. The light-rail line is less of a sure thing, Cooke said, because it would need federal and state funds to cover about 75 percent of the capital cost.

Orange and Durham counties have begun collecting the sales tax and other fees to help finance their transit plans. They include improved bus service, a light-rail line from UNC-Chapel Hill to Duke and - if Wake agrees - the commuter train from Duke to Garner.

The Wake County commissioners' Republican majority balked at joining Orange and Durham in approving transit investments and scheduling a referendum on the half-cent sales tax. Commissioner Paul Coble was the board's chief transit skeptic, and it was his idea to bypass Cooke and Triangle Transit to seek the advice of outside experts.

Commissioner Joe Bryan, the board chairman, has said he hopes to develop a transit plan to submit for voter approval, but he wanted to delay action until after the vote on the county's \$810 million school bond proposal, which won voter approval in October.

The commissioners have not said much about their intentions. They could call for changes to Cooke's plan, or they could throw it out altogether. The Regional Transportation Alliance, a business group that lobbies for transportation improvements, recently criticized the plan and called for Wake to consider investing instead in bus rapid transit - a hybrid breed of transportation that is gaining ground in U.S. cities as less expensive and more flexible than rail, but faster and more enjoyable than regular buses.

Coble and other commissioners have drafted a list of 25 questions for their three transit panelists, including these:

"How would Wake County benefit from a comprehensive transit solution and why?"

"Are there viable private sector alternatives (and if so describe)?"

"What are the most accepted models for financing and what are the key components?"

"What is the industry model for best of class governance role of transit?"

After their scheduled meeting at 9 a.m. Tuesday with the county commissioners, the three panelists have agreed to take questions in a more informal session at 2 p.m. that afternoon, also at the Marbles Kids Museum, from local transit planners and civic groups interested in transit. Both sessions are open to the public.

It's not clear whether the three panelists will have any role to play after their one scheduled day in Raleigh. Cooke said a few weeks ago that they were not hired as consultants. Wake County is paying their expenses and has offered each a \$1,500 honorarium.

"These panelists have a wealth of experience in working in varied regions, communities and cities as it relates to transit," said Tim Maloney, Wake County planning director. "Because of that experience, they may be able to shed some light on questions that our board members have. ... What happens after Tuesday, I can't tell you."

Bryan, Coble and Cooke did not respond Friday to requests for comment.

Transit advocates are pressing the commissioners to move ahead with a plan and schedule a referendum on the half-cent sales tax. More than 250 people attended a three-hour session Thursday to hear planners, developers and other speakers argue for transit improvements to help Wake County and the Triangle manage growth and promote economic development.