

Regional ballot measures fund transportation projects

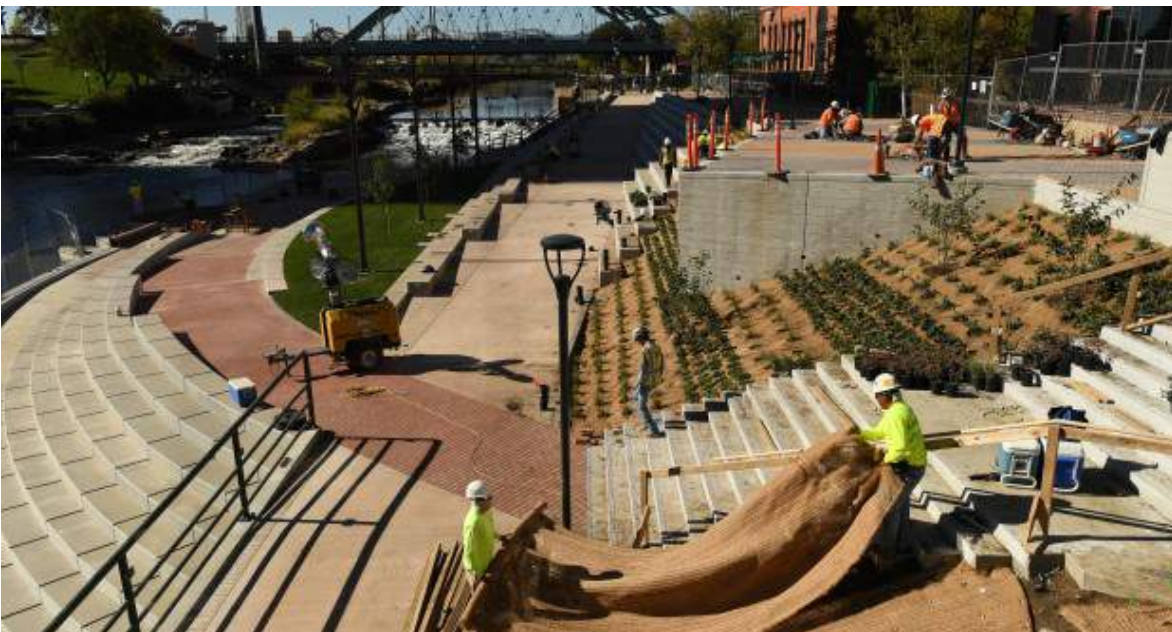
In cities and towns across the country voters are stepping up to invest in locally-driven transportation projects by approving new local and regional tax measures. Nationwide, over 70 percent of proposed transportation ballot measures have been approved by voters.¹ Forty-one states allow local ballot measures to secure funding for transportation projects.²

In Massachusetts voters unfortunately do not have the same power to directly approve funding for local and regional transportation priorities. Unlike most other states, Massachusetts does not allow localities to raise their own revenues via voter-approved ballot measures to dedicate to transportation projects.

What could be possible in Massachusetts if communities had the ability to raise new funding at the local level for transportation? These case studies from across the country highlight just a few of the many places that have funded transportation projects through ballot measures, demonstrating a range of possibilities. This is a flexible funding tool; the examples below include rural, suburban, small city, and large city settings; “red” states and “blue” states; a variety of types of projects including public transportation, trails, and roads; and a range of funding mechanisms including property taxes, sales taxes, and excise taxes.

Denver, Colorado

In 2017 Denver voters approved a plan to add 50 miles of bikeways, 33 miles of sidewalks, 375 miles of road repairs, and development of a new bus rapid transit line. The total price tag of \$415 million will be paid from city property taxes.³



Reconstruction of Denver’s Confluence Park (<https://www.denverpost.com/2017/10/12/confluence-park-reopening/>)

This was not the first time Denver voters stepped up to invest their local tax dollars in transportation. The new plan follows a successful measure, approved by city voters in 2007, that funded projects like sidewalk and pedestrian improvements on major corridors like Colfax Ave, California Street and Tennyson Street; improved connections to new light rail stations; and construction of the Confluence Park Trail.⁴ The Denver region's massive transit expansion—a project that is adding 122 miles of new rail transit lines—was possible only because voters region-wide approved the FasTracks plan on the ballot in 2004, adding a 0.4-cent sales tax dedicated to new transit construction.⁵

Manhattan, Kansas

In 2016 voters in Manhattan approved a special local sales tax to fund street repairs and projects to create safe routes to schools. The 0.2 percent sales tax will add \$2 million a year for ten years to the transportation budget of this small university town of 50,000 located in northeast Kansas.⁶ Manhattan is using an objective measure of pavement quality to steer these new funds to streets in disrepair; currently 150 miles of city streets are below the acceptable pavement quality threshold. Five percent of new revenue is set aside to fund the city's Safe Routes to School Program. A study completed in 2015 identifies the most-needed sidewalk, crosswalk, and other street improvements to ensure elementary school students can get safely to and from school.⁷

"These additional funds will significantly expand our ability to properly maintain our local streets and improve safety around our schools," said Mayor Usha Reddi when the measure passed.⁸



Manhattan, KS, street repairs (<https://cityofmhk.com/2584/Street-Maintenance-Sales-Tax>)

Volusia County, Florida

The ECHO program in Volusia County, approved by voters in 2000, has created a dedicated local funding stream for a county-wide trail network, as well as other recreation, environmental, and preservation projects to improve quality of life. Over nearly two decades this funding has supported projects across this growing county of 500,000 on Florida's east coast. The grassroots-led initiative, supported by 57 percent of county voters, levies a 0.2 mill special property tax.⁹ Since 2004 the county has dedicated \$1 million per year from this program to developing a county-wide network of trails.¹⁰ This network includes projects like the East Central Regional Rail Trail, a project to convert the longest abandoned rail line in Florida into a recreational trail that will eventually stretch 50 miles.

Grand Rapids, Michigan

Grand Rapids and the surrounding communities have a growing, reliable transit network funded by voter-approved property taxes. The midsized city, with a regional population of just over 1 million, was one of the first in the country to develop a bus rapid transit line. The Rapid, the regional transit agency, serves six cities across the region with 28 fixed bus routes and paratransit service.¹¹

Since 2000, Grand Rapids area residents have voted four times to approve The Rapid's local property tax funding. These voter-approved local property taxes cover a third of The Rapid's operating budget. The growth in funding has allowed for increased service reaching more riders: between 2000 and 2017 ridership grew from 4.5 million to 11.5 million trips.¹²

In 2011, voters narrowly approved a tax rate increase to expand service.¹³ The rate increase provided the local portion of the funding to complete and open the Silver Line, a 10-mile bus rapid transit line, the first in Michigan.¹⁴ Additional funding also allowed The Rapid to increase service on its other routes, swapping once-an-hour service for buses running every 15 or 30 minutes. Service was also extended later into the night during the week and on weekends.¹⁵



Grand Rapids Silver Line (<http://www.therapidian.org/rapid-seeks-partner-naming-rights-silver-line>)

The increasing frequency had a big impact on riders. "You don't have to stand out waiting as long," one daily bus commuter told MLive. "And if I have to leave in the middle of the day and go to a doctor appointment I have to plan in that time riding the bus, so those increased times are a huge help during the day and in the evening."¹⁶

In 2017, voters overwhelmingly approved a renewal and continuation of the local property tax levy.¹⁷

Seattle, Washington

The Seattle region is making major investments in a new transit network thanks to new local tax funds approved over the last two decades.

When the system is built out with the dedicated funding now approved, the 116-mile light rail transit network will traverse the entire Puget Sound region.

New construction and daily operations for Sound Transit, the regional transit agency, are funded through a regional sales tax, motor vehicle excise tax, property tax, and rental car tax.¹⁸ These local funding tools have been enabled by the state legislature and then repeatedly supported by voters in Seattle and the region at the ballot box.

Three region-wide initiatives – in 1996, 2008, and 2016 – have secured nearly \$50 billion in dedicated funding for constructing these projects.¹⁹ The first measure launched the regional agency.²⁰ The second measure, dubbed Sound Transit 2 and approved 58-42 percent, secured \$17 billion in new local funding to allow the system to grow.²¹ Local support for increasing funding for transit has been bolstered by the opening of the initial legs of the system. The Sound Transit 3 (ST3) ballot measure, a major, 40-year, \$53 billion proposal, including \$28 billion in new local taxes, was approved in 2016 by a margin of 54-46 percent. ST3 is funded by dedicated revenues from a new 0.5 percent sales tax, a 0.8 percent motor vehicle excise tax (\$80 annually on a \$10,000 vehicle), and a 0.25 mill property tax increase.²²

Even as these region-wide transit projects advance, Seattle voters have also approved additional local funding for city streets, sidewalk, bikeway, and transit improvements. In 2015 city voters approved The Levy to Move Seattle, a 9-year, \$930 million plan, by a 56-44 percent margin.²³ The levy funds bike and pedestrian safety, neighborhood streets, and bus rapid transit projects.²⁴ Funding is dedicated from new local property taxes. A citizen oversight committee, appointed by the mayor and city council, oversee how these local funds are spent.



Move Seattle supporters (<http://murray.seattle.gov/mayor-ed-murray-launches-move-seattle-transportation-strategy/>)

Locally approved funding measures have also been critical to keep transit service running in Seattle. In 2014, King County Metro, the transit operator serving Seattle and the surrounding county, faced a budget deficit due to effects of the recession. To reverse service cuts Seattle voters approved a new transit benefit district, funding local transit through a 0.1 percent sales tax increase and a vehicle registration surcharge.²⁵ These voter-backed, local funds restored 270,000 hours of bus service each year, restarting routes and boosting bus frequencies on busy corridors.²⁶ New funding also supported a youth pass program offering free transit passes to 2,700 Seattle youths.

Atlanta, Georgia

Atlanta will see more than a dozen new neighborhood greenways, the completion of a portion of the BeltLine trail network, and major new transit projects thanks to two special sales tax measures approved by city voters in 2016.²⁷ A five-year, 0.4-cent city sales tax will allow Atlanta to purchase the remaining right-of-way for the one-of-a-kind BeltLine urban trail network that encircles the entire city along former rail lines. The measure will also provide \$75 million for fifteen complete streets projects and new funding for sidewalk upgrades and traffic signal optimization. A second measure, also approved by city voters in 2016, will fund major long-term upgrades to MARTA, the regional transit system. This 40-year, 0.5-cent special sales tax will generate an estimated \$2.5 billion to make major capital upgrades to the transit network within the city. Voters in the suburban portion of Fulton County outside the city of Atlanta approved a separate transportation measure in 2016, approving a five-year, 0.75-cent special sales tax dedicated to a set of road and highway projects across the county.²⁸



Groundbreaking for East Side Trail (by Maigh <https://www.flickr.com/photos/maigh/5128573763/>)

These three successful, locally driven measures follow the defeat of a sprawling 2012 region-wide ballot measure that proposed a long list of road, transit, and other projects across the region.²⁹ In 2016 the Georgia legislature passed a law enabling local (county- and city-level) ballot measures to approve special sales taxes dedicated to local transportation projects.³⁰ This allowed the city and county to put forward the more focused plans that voters endorsed.

East Bay, California

The Iron Horse Trail, a pioneering 32-mile rail-trail in the East Bay suburbs along a nineteenth-century railroad right-of-way, has become a major recreation and commuter route that sees a million riders per year.³¹ The trail has been developed in segments over the past three decades as a partnership among the East Bay Regional Park District and local governments. Voters have overwhelmingly approved local sales tax funding to extend the trail. Measure B, a sales tax measure for transportation approved in 2000 with 82 percent of the vote in Alameda County and Measure WW, a park bond approved in 2008 by 72 percent of district voters, both provided key funding to complete segments of the trail.³² Alameda County's Measure BB, a follow-up measure overwhelmingly approved in 2014, provided funding to close remaining gaps along the trail.³³



Iron Horse Trail (<https://www.eastbaytimes.com/2017/11/08/trail-bridge-to-bart-over-east-bay-boulevard-moving-forward/>)

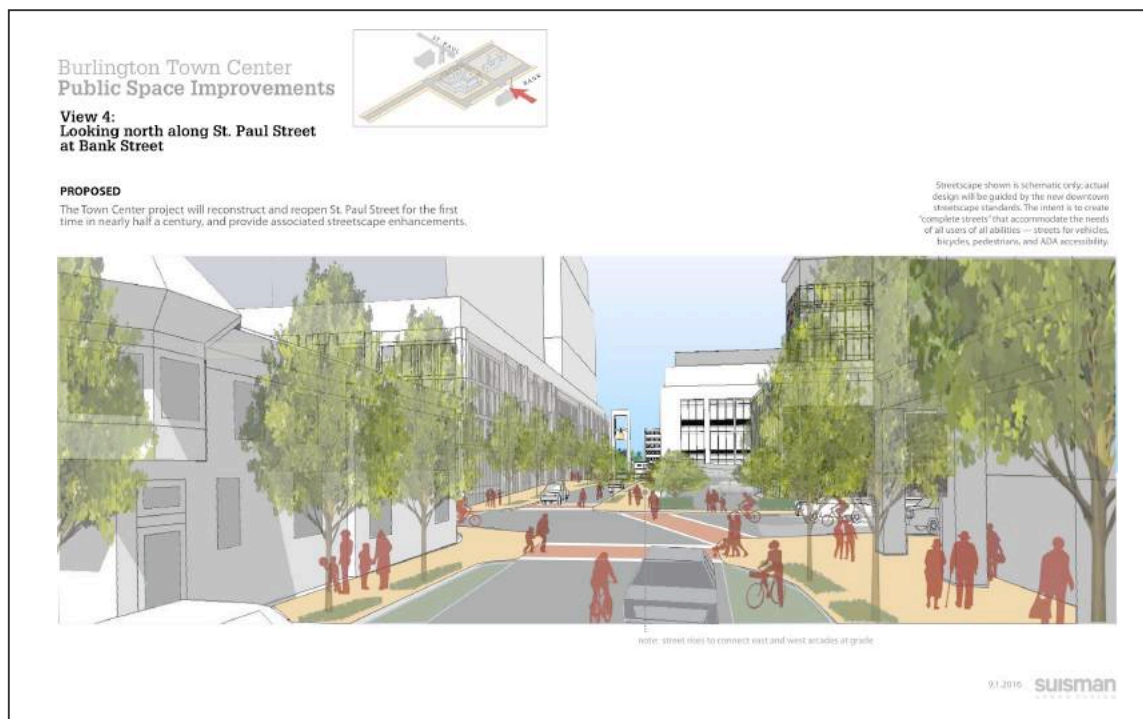
The 2014 ribbon cutting—attended by 125 local residents—opened a 1.6-mile segment of trail connecting the Pleasanton BART transit station to neighborhoods in the city of Pleasanton. This trail segment depended on local funding, which in turn leveraged state transportation funds and a federal TIGER grant.³⁴

Athens-Clarke County, Georgia

By a nearly 3-to-1 margin, voters in Athens-Clarke County approved a special transportation sales tax in November 2017 to fund road expansion, street repairs, and bike and pedestrian trail projects.³⁵ The sales tax will generate \$109 million over 5 years to fund 19 projects in this small, unified city-county, located 75 miles east of Atlanta. A citizen oversight committee helped to develop a project list to be funded from new sales tax revenue. The ballot measure was enabled by legislation passed by the Georgia legislature in 2016 to allow counties to levy special local transportation sales taxes with voter approval (the same legislation that enabled Atlanta's ballot measures).³⁶

Burlington, Vermont

In 2016 voters in Burlington approved a plan for a downtown development financed through \$21.8 million in tax-increment financing bonds.³⁷ The project is replacing an aging downtown shopping mall, built as an urban renewal project in 1976, with a new retail, office, and residential development. Part of the project will rebuild and reconnect city streets that were severed by the mall project in the 1970s and add wider sidewalks, public art, better lighting, granite curbs, and benches. These public assets for the project will be paid for through tax-increment financing, meaning increased property tax receipts from parcels within the redevelopment area will be set aside to pay for new infrastructure. This plan required voter approval and proved contentious, but the measure was approved 59-41 percent.³⁸



Rendering of Burlington street improvements

(<https://www.burlingtonvt.gov/sites/default/files/CEDO/Files/btmall/BTC%20Public%20Improvements%20Presentation%2009012016.pdf>)

Western Springs, Illinois

In 2016 voters in Western Springs, Illinois, a suburban village 20 miles west of the Chicago Loop, approved a \$12 million bond backed by local property taxes. Village voters previously approved \$6.5 million in road repair bonds in 2008; those funds were exhausted in 2014.³⁹ After a review of the village's street infrastructure and the capital planning process, village leaders found a gap of \$1-\$1.4 million to continue to maintain city streets.⁴⁰ The new bond allows the village to accelerate repair of city streets, prioritizing those in worst condition. The approved measure raises property taxes \$200 a year for the median village homeowner.

Kitsap County, Washington

Residents of Kitsap County have new, high-speed commuter ferry service to Seattle thanks to local funding approved by voters in 2016. The measure secures a 0.3 percent local sales tax to fund ferry service.⁴¹ The first route began operation in July 2017 and two more routes will be added in 2018 and 2020.⁴²



Kitsap Transit Fast Ferry (<https://www.theurbanist.org/2017/07/05/kitsap-transits-fast-ferry-starts-monday/>)

The 2016 measure was the third such question put to Kitsap County voters and the first to pass. After the county lost passenger ferry service due to state budget cuts Kitsap Transit, the county transit agency, put measures on the ballot in 2003 and 2007 to raise the county sales tax to fund new passenger ferries, but both measures were rejected.⁴³ Kitsap Transit developed a new ferryboat and an improved operating plan and in 2016 again asked voters for dedicated ferry funding.⁴⁴ This measure was narrowly approved with 52 percent of the vote.⁴⁵

Greene County, Ohio

In 2015 voters in Greene County approved new local funding to maintain an extensive network of recreational trails. The rural and suburban county of 160,000 east of Dayton is the center of a trail network with paths stretching in five directions and reaching as far as Cincinnati and Columbus.

A five-year, 0.9 mill property tax levy now brings in approximately \$3.3 million per year.⁴⁶ From this funding, \$1 million annually is directed to trail maintenance, \$1 million to capital projects, and the remainder to ongoing operations at county parks. The parks district sought new local funding because state budget cuts jeopardized the ongoing maintenance of the county's trails. These local funds will allow the parks district to close an \$800,000 maintenance backlog. For example, in 2017 the parks district completed pavement repairs along three major trails. Local levy funding allowed the parks

district to secure additional matching funding from the state and regional transportation commission for these projects.⁴⁷



Recreation trail in Greene County (<https://www.co.greene.oh.us/>)

“The natural resources of Greene County offer a wealth of opportunity to our residents,” Greene County Park District President John Finlay said in a release. “Whether it’s through improving our quality of life or positively impacting our local economy, a strong parks and trails program has proven to improve the quality of life for all residents. We are so grateful that voters value the work of Greene County Parks & Trails and chose to support our efforts with their vote.”⁴⁸

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