

Fighting Poverty through Access to Transportation

Dan Carpenter

Charlie Davis remembers walking 10 miles home one night after missing the last bus from his job.

Ron Gee used to sleep in the break room after his second shift ended – past the run time for public transportation.

These Indianapolis men were among more than 1,500 volunteers, many of them low-income bus riders, who worked phones and knocked on doors for 12 weeks leading up to an historic referendum on one of America's worst mass transit systems. And their side won, adding momentum to a new national strategy that uses transportation access as a key poverty-fighting tool.

"I know what it means not to catch that last bus and what it's like to have to wait 45 minutes or an hour or more," says Davis, who's now retired. "I've compared us to other cities, and there is no comparison. We want to be a world-class city and we don't have mass transit to match that image."

After an estimated 164,000 calls, 40,000 face-to-face encounters and 5,000 tweets, victory was achieved – or at least, a trip to the finals. By a margin of about 60 percent to 40 percent, voters approved a measure last week to allow the City-County Council to impose an income tax increase of 25 cents per \$100 to expand and upgrade the IndyGo bus service, beginning in 2018.

The tiny percentage is huge for IndyGo, which serves America's 14th-largest city with its 86th-largest bus system. It would add \$56 million to the annual budget – a 70 percent increase – and also contribute toward a planned Red Line rapid transit service, which would be mostly federally funded.

If the Council follows suit, and projections are reached, 15-to-30-minute intervals for buses will become routine in a community where two-hour waits now are commonplace. Service hours will be dramatically stretched into early mornings and late nights. Long walks to bus stops will be history for the vast majority of residents.

There's a caveat: The Council could enact a smaller increase than voters approved, or reject the measure entirely, though proponents insist either would be an extraordinary breach of the referendum's spirit. The Council did vote 18-6 to let the referendum go forward.

The Circle City was far from alone in this quest or its outcome. According to the advocacy group Center for Transportation Excellence, tax hikes were on the ballot in 49 U.S. locales and won approval in at least 33. (Virtually none rested on income taxes; sales and property taxes were the norm.)

And the effects of commute difficulties and lack of affordable transportation continues to be a hot topic in poverty policy circles, as shown in a [Harvard University study](#) last year.

Heavily backed by the Greater Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce, United Way, AARP, the real estate community and other establishment entities, Indianapolis's referendum has been widely hailed as a shot in the arm for overall economic development. But to the largely-low-income volunteer corps and the coalition of anti-poverty faith groups that coordinated their grassroots campaign, it is first and foremost a landmark for social equity and mobility.

"This was more than just a vote about buses and trains," says Shoshanna Spector, executive director of the Indianapolis Congregation Network (IndyCAN). "It was a way to answer the question 'Do we as Hoosiers and residents of Indianapolis believe in investing in people and investing in our neighbors?' The overwhelming answer is that we do."

Citing the 2015 Harvard study identifying transportation, she added: "This will triple access to jobs for low-income people and people of color. It's a game-changer."

Mark Fisher, who led the charge for the Chamber of Commerce, notes that agreement between his forces and IndyCAN on economic issues is less than frequent, particularly when tax hikes are involved. Here, he says, mutual interest was clear.

“People need access to jobs, education, health care. Business needs workforce mobility, a maximized talent pool. When people pay taxes for transit, all of us benefit from a more productive and healthier population.”

Research lends reinforcement to the argument.

A study by the nonprofit Institute for Working Families pegged the average monthly car expense for a family of one adult and two young children at \$255 in Indianapolis, where mass transit penetration is among the nation’s lowest. Monthly transportation costs average \$140 in Denver, \$99 in Seattle and \$76 in San Francisco. The institute calculates that the vastly upgraded transit plan Indy’s voters green-lighted would save nearly \$1,900 for that three-member Indy household by making the bus a preferred option over the car.

“That’s more than a semester of tuition at Ivy Tech (Community College),” says Andrew Bradley, senior policy analyst for the institute. “That’s not pocket change.”

Especially not in a city where one-third of bus riders live below the poverty line – and a city that ranks nearly dead last in the nation for upward mobility by the poor. While heavy hitters in the city’s boardrooms mobilized on their behalf, IndyCAN put the riders themselves in the driver’s seat.

“These are people who are often ignored by traditional politicians,” says Spector of IndyCAN. “Neighbors got out and talked to neighbors, all for the sake of making Indianapolis fair. They wanted to be part of a community, to feel we’re all in it together.”

The Chamber reportedly raised about \$500,000 for the campaign. IndyCAN, an affiliate of the national faith-based anti-poverty group PICO (People Improving Communities through Organizing), spent about \$250,000.

It has been a long haul. City leaders and most of their counterparts in the adjacent suburbs lobbied the Indiana General Assembly for more than a decade just for permission to tax their own locals for transit. The legislature gave its thumbs-up in 2014 after a series of weekly prayer vigils at the Statehouse involving hundreds of citizens organized by IndyCAN, which represents 19 faith communities.

The ultimate goal is regional transit, easing commuter traffic congestion and ferrying workers from the central city to the job growth areas across county lines. The Indianapolis referendum would be the longest step so far. For both camps of unlikely allies, it leaves a long road ahead. For IndyCAN, that road ends only when the whole web of economic justice issues, from transportation to immigration to incarceration, ties together.

“We’re changing the political environment,” Spector says. “We’re in it for the long haul.”

Dan Carpenter is a freelance writer, a former op-ed columnist for The Indianapolis Star and author of two books of non-fiction and two of poetry. I've spent most of my life in my native Indianapolis.

Editor’s Note: This article is part of a new effort at Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity to feature reported journalism as part of its efforts illuminate news and trends in the field to promote a bipartisan dialogue. To submit pieces, please contact Bill Nichols at nichols@freedmanconsulting.com.

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