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### **Georgia House passes TSPLOST measure**

**By: Lori Yount**

ATLANTA — The House passed its own version of a local transportation sales tax Thursday, bringing the measure a step closer to voters in November.

The proposed constitutional amendment would allow elected officials in regions to ask local voters to approve a sales tax up to 1 percent to fund transportation projects.

In November, all Georgians would vote on whether to create the so-called transportation special purpose local option sales tax (TSPLOST). It wouldn't be until July 2009 until regions could hold referendums and let voters decide whether to actually levy the tax.

North Georgia legislators said although their districts may not need the option now, with continued growth and the state Department of Transportation facing shortfalls of \$7 billion in the next six years, it might help in the future.

“It could help metro Atlanta and as a result, help us all,” said Rep. Barbara Massey Reece, D-Menlo. “If metro Atlanta chooses to use it, there might be other areas in the state that might find it a useful tool.”

To address concerns and rally support from two-thirds of House members, an amendment giving an opt-out for counties in a region.

And it now directs all motor fuel sales to the Department of Transportation, boosting DOT funding by almost \$200 million.

Rep. Reece said both amendments helped win her vote, especially the opt-out measure, because it ensures “every county will have an equal voice at the table.”

Gov. Sonny Perdue's rural caucus statements Wednesday against the TSPLOST held no sway with Rep. Reece. The voters, not Gov. Perdue, sign off on constitutional amendments.

“This is an issue that's going to be fully looked at by the people,” she said.

Rep. Roger Williams, R-Dalton, said the House's regional approach for the local sales tax, versus the Senate's version that would leave ballot referendums up to individual counties, would help counties in North Georgia with smaller sales tax bases.

“It enables regional development,” he said. “We can't afford to do it on our own.”

Rep. Martin Scott, R-Rossville said he was one of the “no’s” in the 136-35 vote because it violated his pledge against tax increases.

The legislation now goes to conference committee to be reconciled with a Senate version of the TSPLOST that passed last month.

The two proposals are “close,” said Sen. Jeff Mullis, R-Chickamauga, who sponsored the Senate measure.

“The main thing is to opt-out, for people to decide if they want the referendum,” he said.