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House OKs transit-tax referendums

Governor objects: Measure could lead to amending constitution to let regions vote on 1-cent sales levy for transportation projects.

By Ariel Hart

The state House on Thursday approved a measure to allow regions in Georgia to seek voter consent to a penny sales tax for transportation projects.

The resolution won 16 more votes than the two-thirds of the House it needed as a constitutional amendment. The Senate has passed a similar version (SR 845), so the proposals now go to a conference committee to work out the differences.

Thursday's vote followed an impassioned speech from the well of the House by Speaker Glenn Richardson.

"We've been stifled for too long with doing nothing," Richardson said. From those who oppose it, he demanded to know what they planned instead. "If you've offered nothing, shame on you. It's time to do something."

The remarks seemed aimed at Gov. Sonny Perdue, who expressed misgivings about the referendums but mostly stayed on the sidelines, until Wednesday.

Perdue addressed a couple dozen rural legislators Wednesday, telling them if they passed the proposal, he would speak against it all the way to November, said Rep. Debbie Buckner (D-Junction City), one of the group.

Perdue proffered numerous objections, Buckner said. Two among them were that the measure relinquishes the state's authority and that the Department of Transportation needs to be reformed before any new money is approved for transportation projects. He also brought up the Atlanta-rural divide.

"He said this was something that the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce supported and he couldn't see how it was going to be good for rural Georgia," Buckner said.

Perdue spokesman Bert Brantley said the governor is concerned about the equity of a sales tax, since rural people shop in urban areas and their sales taxes flow to the cities instead of their homes. Those rural shoppers use the urban transportation systems when they spend their money, but Brantley said the cities would still benefit disproportionately. He said he didn't have figures to demonstrate that.

"The governor obviously has expressed his concern and will continue to do that,"

Brantley said.

Buckner said he didn't sway her, given the dire state of transportation in Georgia. "I'm at the point now where there needs to be some leadership," she said.

Since a constitutional amendment does not require the governor's signature, the obstacles now are the differences between the House and the Senate, including provisions for who administers the tax and decides the projects.

The Senate's version would allow counties to group together, while the House version divides the state into regional development commissions. Amendments in the House version would exempt airplane fuel and allow counties to decide to opt out of a regional tax, potentially punching holes in whatever transportation projects the region hopes to build with its tax.

However, "I think the real broader issue is granting taxing authority to an RDC," said Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle. "That's never been done and there's great concern on the Senate's part with that."