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Transit funding overhaul advances
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The Georgia Senate overwhelmingly passed a resolution Wednesday that would allow voters to approve new transportation funding.

Senate Resolution 845, sponsored by Senate Transportation Committee Chairman Jeff Mullis (R-Chickamauga), would allow voters in counties to group together and pass regional one-cent sales taxes for transportation. Ninety percent of the funds would be spent on projects in the voters' region, and the rest could be spent anywhere in the state.

"We're making history, we're doing something that hasn't been done for 30 or 40 years — - and that's improve transportation in Georgia," Mullis said. "It's an all inclusive bill."

The bill passed 51 to 4. Mullis said he wasn't surprised it had garnered so much support.

"Everyone is tired of sitting in traffic," he said, after the vote.

Some counties, such as Cobb, already fund transportation projects with special local sales taxes, but funding advocates say that's not nearly enough. Many of the projects that metro Atlanta boosters say the region needs to lift it out of the congestion crisis are too big for any one city or county to fund them, and the state has been either unwilling or unable to make them happen. Studies show that, under the current statewide gas tax system, a large portion of metro Atlanta's taxes are siphoned off to projects in other parts of the state.

The Senate resolution's backers, including Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle, have described SR 845 as a first step. They are waiting for the House to pass its own transportation funding legislation, so the two can negotiate a compromise.

The House legislation would allow voters to levy a one-cent sales tax statewide, but it mandates that the state spend most of the money collected in a district on projects that are within that district.

That proposal was the subject of a long and contentious debate in a key House subcommittee Wednesday afternoon.

Vance Smith (R-Pine Mountain), who sponsored the bill, said the House legislation will be perfected as it moves along.

"I sincerely think this is a step in the right direction," he said. "I think what we're trying to do is get to the end of what we need and do what's right for the people."

Rep. Tom Graves (R-Ranger) questioned whether citizens will approve what he called "the largest tax increase in the history of Georgia."

"How do we know we are doing the right thing?"

After four hours of discussion, the committee approved the legislation 20-5.

Both versions propose constitutional amendments and voter referendums. Gov. Sonny Perdue has said he is reluctant to support any new transportation taxes.

Transportation funding currently comes mostly from the gas tax, and the state gas tax is collected in two parts. The first part is collected in cents per gallon, not cents per dollar, so it doesn't rise with inflation, but lawmakers have to vote to raise it. They've left it alone at 7.5 cents per gallon since 1971. An additional gas tax is collected at about 4 cents per dollar, only 3 cents of which go to transportation.