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WHEN A TAX IS GOOD FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

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On November 8th, Broward County voters will be the next group of Florida residents to consider a one penny sales tax increase to fund transportation and infrastructure. While no one likes the idea of paying more taxes, anyone who has driven in South Florida can appreciate the need for transportation improvements. The referendum is known as the "Transportation Surtax Plan" (the "Surtax"), and its supporters contend it will create connectivity across Broward's 31 municipalities, job centers, and tourism destinations by establishing enhanced, efficient and accessible transit services, including light rail. Over its 30-year life, the Surtax is estimated to generate $204 million for transportation which will be added to (not subtracted from) the estimated $1 billion in general fund dollars already committed to this effort.

So what does this Surtax have to do with the environment? The County's Environmental Protection and Growth Management Department has analyzed the Surtax and offered its perspective.[1]

The most recent Broward County Greenhouse Gas inventory (2011-2014), identifies 56% of regional CO2 emissions to be associated with the transportation sector, with road vehicles accounting for 71% of this total. Using the same methods employed in the County's regional emissions inventory and national guidelines for estimating ridership, service hours, and VMT (vehicle miles traveled) reductions, it is estimated that the Surtax could achieve nearly a 25% reduction in emissions through removal of personal vehicles from roadways, likely greater if we account for other shifts in modes of transportation that frequently accompany transit investments, as well as congestion relief (less fuel inefficient idling), and associated changes in land use. Additional emissions reductions are likely to be achieved through changes in travel activity, more efficient system operations, and local government investments that improve ease of use and other incentives that encourage ridership. The Surtax would afford the ability to increase transit coverage and quality and attract more "choice" riders, which are people who have a car, but would be more likely to use transit if service quality and convenience is increased. More "choice" transit riders would reduce the number of automobiles that would otherwise be on the road, and result in less congested roadways.

Another area of community need that could be furthered with the Surtax is climate resilience investments to help ensure basic levels-of-service are maintained under conditions of future sea level rise. It is estimated that more than 81 miles of roads in Broward County will be inundated with two feet of sea level rise. Investments in elevating critical roadways and associated drainage infrastructure will be a major part of the adaptation strategies needed to protect our transportation corridors, communities, and economy. Greenhouse gas emissions and sea level rise: two of the most pressing environmental issues for our community in our lifetime. Those issues, however, are not insurmountable. In fact, many scientists, engineers and policy makers have spent substantial time figuring out creative and effective ways to address both – they have just lacked the funding to fully implement them. Voters are being asked to think about whether the anticipated environmental and other benefits to our community are worth a penny. A penny for your thoughts?

[1] 2016 Transportation Surtax Plan (edited 9-27-16), Broward County Environmental Protection and Growth Management Department

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