

Save the buses: Vote YES for the penny

Written by Brett Bursey, SC Progressive Network
Thursday, 01 November 2012 10:11 -



When was the last time you rode a bus? About 6,000 of your Richland County neighbors rely on public transit every day. That's down from over 8,000 two years ago. Funding for the buses has been cut 40% over the past two years, routes have been eliminated and wait times have doubled or quadrupled for some riders.

Buses in the Columbia-area have not evolved from the "plantation transportation system" that was designed to get low-wage workers to jobs that don't pay enough for them to own a car. Back when Jim Crow ran the system, the last buses out of town left before dark. Today, the last bus is at 6:30pm. Few buses run on Saturdays, and none run on Sundays or holidays.

The service is so poor, who would want to ride the bus in Richland County? Sadly, some people have no choice.

David Brown, a 48-year-old laid-off worker, rides the bus to computer classes at a tech school. The round trip that used to take one hour now take up to four hours.

Leslie Goodson lost her job when service was cut on weekends. Not having transportation wasn't a good enough reason for Leslie to get unemployment benefits. She's still looking for a job that conforms with the bus schedule.

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Adrian Metso is a manager at a manufacturing facility out on Two Notch where the buses have quit running. Since bus services were cut, he has had to lay off three workers who were chronically late because they lacked transportation.

The Disability Action Center has a client who wanted desperately to get a job, not easy because he is blind and deaf. They finally found him a job at a restaurant on a bus line -- just before the service was cut. He lost his job and his dream of independence.

Richland County voters have an opportunity to make a real change at the ballot box this year. It won't be voting for any candidate, who might lose or let you down. It will be voting to increase the county's sales tax by a penny to save the bus system in the Midlands.

One could argue that there should be a better way to fund public transit than through a sales tax that hits the poor the hardest, but there hasn't been a viable plan to sustain the buses since SCE&G quit running the system 10 years ago.

The SC Progressive Network lobbied Richland County Council to raise a smaller sales tax just for the buses. Our efforts saw the funding for the buses increased by \$30 million, but Council voted to go with a plan to put 63% of the penny towards roads, 29% to buses and 8% for pathways.

Council was convinced that the measure wouldn't pass unless there was something in it for the majority of taxpayers who don't use the buses. Some 42% of the money is projected to come from people who don't live in Richland County.

Of the billion dollars the penny tax is projected to raise over the next 22 years, the buses will get \$301 million. The 29% dedicated to the buses and the DART system for disabled riders cannot be used for roads or green spaces. Riders and communities need to organize to insure that public transit expands in ways that meet their needs.

If the penny passes, cuts to services over the past two years will be quickly restored. Within the next few years:

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- fixed routes will be expanded
- wait times reduced to 15-30 minutes
- hours of service extended
- Sunday and holiday service added
- DART service expanded
- a new transit station and shelters will be built
- traffic congestion will be reduced through Park-and-Ride services
- more riders will mean more revenue, more jobs and a stronger economy

There is no long-term source of funding for buses or DART. If the penny does not pass, the system will run out of funds on June 30, 2013.

Richland County voters need to vote "YES" TWICE for the penny tax. The penny sales tax will appear on Pages 5 and 6 on your Richland County voting machine as Local Question #1 and Local Question #2.

A "YES" vote on # 1 will allow Richland County to collect a penny sales tax for transportation for

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the next 22 years. A "YES" vote on # 2 will allow the County to issue a bond to immediately begin working on the projects.

Let's fund a transit system people will want to use. Vote "YES" TWICE for the penny tax on Nov. 6!

To help Save the Buses, contact the SC Progressive Network at 803-808-3384 or network@scpronet.com. For more about the Network, see scpronet.com or find us on Facebook.