

# Will Clayton adopt MARTA?

## Supporters point to economic growth; foes fear increase in crime.

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### Closer look

Number of bus routes:

8. Six of the routes would be in place by the beginning of fiscal year 2016. The remaining 2 would start by FY 2020.

Types of bus service: Local, flex and paratransit (for the disabled).

Rail: Within 5 to 7 years — if MARTA can work out a deal with Norfolk Southern to use its existing rails, according MARTA board chairman Robbie Ashe III.

## A LOOK AT CLAYTON COUNTY

DEMOGRAPHICS	TRANSPORTATION AND COMMUTING	WHERE THE JOBS ARE
Population in 2013: 264,220 (down from 265,888 in 2012)	Percentage of residents without transportation 7.2%	Sales and office
Black residents 67.8%	Mean travel time to work 29.4 minutes	Management, business science and arts 2
White residents 24.8%		Service 2
Hispanic residents 13.2%		
Asian residents 5.4%		

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau 2013 American Community Survey, One-Year; Neighborhood Nexus

To allow MARTA in or not?

That is the question residents of Clayton County, long sidelined from

metro Atlanta's furious growth, must answer Tuesday.

If they say yes, supporters say, Clayton residents will get not only bus service and eventually rail, but they potentially could change decades of regional economic imbalance and plant the seeds of prosperity.

Clayton's embrace of MAR-TA would do what the regional TSPLOST referendum, rejected by voters two years ago, promised: begin to link, albeit in a smaller way, a region more efficiently — especially for businesses and workers, supporters say.

Or, opponents argue, a yes vote could mean more taxes and crime, without any guarantee that the millions coming from Clayton County will be spent in Clayton.

The outcome of Tuesday's vote is considered, by some, to be one of the biggest development decisions in metro Atlanta since the expansion of Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport.

"This is a huge deal," said Catherine Ross, director of the Center for Quality Growth and Regional Development at Georgia Tech. She is also deputy director of the National Center for Transportation Productivity and Management.

"Joining MARTA could be a catalyst for development and redevelopment in Clayton County," Ross said. "It'll make people want to live there, move businesses there, shop and work there. That's all economic development. What Clayton is doing is positioning itself to not only connect both north and south metro Atlanta but become a rail conduit for metro Atlanta's link to Macon."

The upcoming Clayton vote has captured the attention of national transportation experts, as well.

Of the two dozen transit-related elections being held nationwide on Tuesday, Clayton's is the only one that could lead to the creation of a transit system where none existed. The other elections deal mostly with extending tax collections or bolstering existing transit systems, according to The American Public Transportation Association in Washington, D.C.

"If they make the right decision and join MARTA, it will be the most important decision of the county's economic future," said Chris Leinberger, a professor at George Washington University School of Business and president of Locus, organization of real estate developers and investors who build walkable urban developments and Transit Oriented Development.

Clayton, with 264,000 residents, remains one of metro Atlanta's poorest counties. Regional growth over the decades has bypassed the southside county and marched north to places like Cobb, Fulton and north DeKalb, creating a heavily-lopsided regional economy.

In northern metro Atlanta the elements of a strong economy are abundant: diverse business investment, a plentiful and educated workforce, public transportation and good schools.

Clayton has struggled in each of these areas.

"We haven't grown in a balanced way, due largely to a lack of transportation and where the jobs are in the region," said Nathaniel Smith, founder of the Partnership for Southern Equity, which has taken a big role in trying to bring public transit to Clayton. More than 90 percent of the job centers in metro Atlanta are north of I-20, Smith said. Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport is the sole key job center on the southside.

Grant Wainscott, director of economic development for Clayton, said, "When going after major industries, one of the important amenities

they'd like to have when bringing in workforce is access to public transit.”

Now is the time Clayton needs to make bold moves, some say. While metro Atlanta got socked by the Great Recession, Clayton was knocked out and has yet to bounce back. It still has the highest unemployment rate in the 10-county metro Atlanta region at 9 percent. Home values nosedived leaving many homeowners underwater or forced into foreclosure. It has one of the highest rates in metro Atlanta of residents without transportation, at 7.2 percent, isolating many people without transportation from jobs and other economic opportunities within the county and the region. By comparison, the rate in Cobb and Gwinnett counties is 3.7 percent and 3.4 percent, respectively.

In 2010, Clayton pulled the plug on its C-Tran bus system due to lack of money. Since then, Clayton leaders have been seeking a solution to the county's transportation needs, driven in part by recognition that a lack of transportation carries economic costs.

Kim Hunter of Riverdale said she couldn't go to work for two weeks after the engine in her 2006 Jeep Grand Cherokee blew two months ago. She ended up paying \$56 each way for a cab to get to her job in Tucker. Hunter, who recently got another car, voted in favor of MARTA in early voting.

The lack of public transportation also affects workers traveling into Clayton to work.

Of more than 133,000 jobs in Clayton, 81 percent are filled by workers coming from other counties. Almost three-fourths of the nearly 98,000 employed Clayton residents leave the county to work, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2011 Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics survey.

Public transportation would give more options to those entering and

exiting the county for work.

“It’s the idea of linking transportation to economic development and greater mobility for Clayton,” Ross said.

Despite its struggles, Clayton has landed some economic gems recently. German automaker Porsche moved its North American headquarters from Sandy Springs to the Fulton-Clayton line. Food giant Kroger is building a massive distribution center at the former Fort Gillem Army base in Forest Park. And a call center will open by year’s end in the former J.C. Penney’s in Southlake Mall, bringing 1,100 jobs.

All are significant wins. However, a transit system, supporters say, would help link these places together for residents and businesses. The same goes for the national archives, Riverdale’s city and entertainment complex, Morrow’s convention center and Southern Regional Medical Center.

“We haven’t unlocked the potential of the land and people south of I-20,” Smith said.

But some worry easy connectivity will bring in more than workers. MARTA could serve as a magnet for more crime, some Clayton residents fear.

“It would bring too many (undesirable) people into the county and neighborhoods,” said 27-year-old Riverdale resident Kristen Black, who voted against MARTA’s expansion in early voting.

Adebayo Olaoye lives in Hampton and also cast a ballot against MARTA’s expansion in early voting.

“I know it’s good for ease of transportation, but we need to keep hoodlums out of Clayton County,” Olaoye said.

Other Clayton residents worry inviting MARTA in would invite higher taxes and keep middle-class families away at a time the county is trying to raise sagging home values.

The referendum “doesn’t tell you you have to pay a penny tax,” said Chester Cheney, who lives near Riverdale. “Taxes are already too high in this county.”

The extra penny tax will push Clayton’s sales tax rate to 8 percent — the same as Fulton’s — making it one of the higher sales tax rates in metro Atlanta.

MARTA supporters say the benefits will more than outweigh the negatives. And those who are already have MARTA services are encouraging Clayton to seize the moment.

For decades, Fulton and DeKalb counties, along with the city of Atlanta, have borne the burden of paying for the transit system. In the past, there was concern that any new member of MARTA would be unfairly getting the advantages of a system that they have built and paid for.

“Certainly, when a county joins MARTA, we want that to occur on an equitable basis,” said state Rep. Mike Jacobs, R-Brookhaven, who represents DeKalb and is chairman of the MARTA Oversight Committee. “But you can’t simply throw up that Fulton and DeKalb have been participating all along as a barrier to entry for another county. If we do that, then MARTA is stuck where it is and I don’t view that as a good outcome for anyone.”

Just last week, Fulton Chairman John Eaves and Clayton Chairman Jeff Turner appeared together at an Airport Area Chamber of Commerce meeting and spoke to the group of how MARTA’s expansion into Clayton could boost economic development on the southside.

“The future of MARTA is strengthened by more jurisdictional partners that are part of the system,” Eaves told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. “I’m very hopeful that the citizens of Clayton will vote to join MAR-TA and allocate a penny of their sales tax to support MARTA service for their county.”

If the approved, MARTA initially will address Clayton’s transportation void with limited bus service beginning in March. That will expand within a year to a full complement of about seven key local bus routes. The buses also will link residents to the broader MAR-TA system. MARTA officials say rail would be another five to seven year away but others say it likely will take longer. MAR-TA chief executive Keith Parker has assured Clayton leaders that money collected in Clayton will be used solely for Clayton.

Clayton needs MARTA, said Riverdale resident Betty Black.

“I work at the airport, and there are people there who don’t have a way to work,” she said. “I think it’s patently unfair to have to take a taxi back and forth to work.”