

RTA ATTEMPTS TO CO-OPT PROGRESSIVE VOTE

By Dave Gardner, Founder www.SaveTheSprings.org

I'd like to offer thoughtful voters some critical detail on a complex issue: Proposition 1A, forming the Pikes Peak Rural Transportation Authority, funded by a 40% to 100% increase in the local sales tax rate. The RTA will funnel this money to roadway capacity enhancements, road and bridge maintenance, and mass transit.

My grass-roots advocacy group – SaveTheSprings, formed to promote sustainability and preserve quality of life in the Pikes Peak Region – strongly recommends we defeat RTA. Why would a progressive voice like ours be against RTA?

I'm proud that enlightened, progressive voters are willing to step up and pitch in to do the right thing. We aren't focused on hoarding our cash or lining our pockets at the expense of the environment or our fellow man. So there are appealing aspects to the RTA – 10% for mass transit, for example, and the idea of pitching in to restore decaying infrastructure. Unfortunately, the RTA as a remedy for traffic congestion is a giant step backward. Throwing asphalt at the problem is not terribly innovative, enlightened or effective. It fails to address the root causes of our congestion.

We have 150,000 more people in the county than we had in 1991. Lane/miles of roadway have grown at less than 20% of the rate of population growth. It's evident growth has not been paying (or paving) its way. RTA overcharges all of us so we can continue to undercharge new development for transportation infrastructure. Housing & Building Association notwithstanding, new developments are not assessed for their full off-site impacts on our transportation network. Each new development is a net loss to our overall transportation infrastructure and a contributor to total congestion.

Sound economic policy connects a cost with the behavior that causes it. We should be attaching the full cost of transportation impacts to each new development we approve. If we don't, it should be because we knowingly and intentionally decide to subsidize development based on perceived benefit to the community.

The growth industry was well-represented on the "citizen task force" that came up with this cleverly-disguised corporate welfare tax, and members of this industry are the biggest supporters of the pro-RTA campaign -- bankrolling billboards, yard signs, flyers and commercials. They love RTA because it shifts costs that should be theirs onto the public at large. Their activities over the past 15 years created the congestion, and they think we're miserable enough we'll gladly pay more than our share – 100% -- of the cost of fixing it, as well as the ongoing cost of building off-site infrastructure to serve future growth.

These quotes from a March 22, 2001 story in The Independent about a SCIP ballot proposal would seem to apply today: From Jann Nance of the Council of Neighborhood Organizations: "Ask yourself why traditionally anti-tax entities like developers and realtors are pouring contributions into the campaign promoting this tax increase. The answer, I think, is that the \$60 million in annual tax revenues produced by this measure will take heat off the city to make development pay its way." From Jan Doran: "CONO is concerned that SCIP 01 would provide tacit voter blessing to a system that refuses to tie infrastructure cost and fiscal impact analysis to

development approval. It would propagate the old system of taxpayers subsidizing developers."

Citizens have a right to decide whether we want to continue giving the development industry financial-aid. And we should have a say in whether local governments continue the growth-pandering policies that created the traffic mess. Sadly, nearly every decision about how we grow and how we fund that growth is made in council chambers and commissioners court, not by the citizens. The RTA is one of our few chances to be heard on this issue. It's a referendum on area growth management.

The growth industry threw progressive voters a bone by including transit funding in RTA -- hoping it would overshadow the fact RTA will subsidize continued Stupid Growth. But we can do better. This community is ready. We're at a critical juncture and we cannot sign up for another decade of business-as-usual. If we pass the RTA tax, with its tacit approval of continued Stupid Growth policies, the more we grow, the slower we will go.

What's missing? A change in the grow-at-any-cost policies that created the traffic mess. We need requirements that new developments pay for off-site impacts, that adequate infrastructure be in place concurrent with development, and that new development be transit and pedestrian-friendly and contain work centers. None of the 85 cities in the Texas Transportation Institute Study have been able to pour asphalt fast enough to stay ahead of congestion-related traffic delays.

Community dinosaurs are betting we're miserable enough in traffic we'll mindlessly pass any backward solution they put in front of us. Only after a no vote will the growth industry come to the table, as a last resort, to contribute their share. And only if we send a strong message to council and commissioners that we want more responsible growth management, will there be any hope of getting it. I've watched our local governments at work long enough to know they won't change unless we force them to. We need to send a message loud and clear.

I'm not suggesting we let our infrastructure crumble indefinitely. Let's hold the line on this unwise solution this year, and come back next year with a fair, prudent, much more effective and far-reaching approach. Let's not let our impatience with traffic congestion dupe us into enduring forever an ill-conceived solution.

You have my permission, in fact I encourage you, to copy this and pass it on to your friends, neighbors and co-workers. Or send them to our web site. We have no billboards, commercials or speakers bureau. We don't have the deep pockets of those who will enhance their income through continued growth subsidies and pouring of asphalt.

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