

Focus Groups 5/29/2014- Major Themes

- Back roads in Cobb are great (the 120 Loop, Atlanta Rd, others)
- Interstate traffic is really bad and is avoided when possible
- Business owners want more signal timing to relieve congestion
- Some people thought roads needed widening
- Most all participants strongly wanted more transit options- more frequent service, more destinations, Sunday service
- Most were not familiar with BRT, but once informed thought it was a great idea
- Most all participants like the SPLOST signs that show where their money is being spent
- Most had a good understanding of what SPOST is, however the young professional group had a few unaware
- All believed the county is spending the right amount or not enough on transportation
- Most all believed the SPLOST should be renewed

Focus Group #1 – Business owners/managers

- Most have been in a focus group before
- (see list) Group includes an owner of a landscape company in Acworth; 59-year resident of Cobb County, owns a consulting engineering business for mechanical engineering; owner of barber shop in Marietta, lived here for 15 years; owner of a catering company in Acworth, been in metro Atlanta 24 years; owner of a care-giving company for ten years, lives in Marietta; 16-year resident, manager of beauty salon; event planning business owner for 4 years, resident of Marietta; 14-year resident, recently started a shaved ice catering company in Powder Springs; Marietta resident for 18 years, owner of a diversified health care recruiting company in Marietta.
- Most drive most of the time; one bicycles for part of their transportation. Some have employees that use the bus. One has a blind husband who uses transit.
- **Good things about getting around in Cobb?** – know the back roads; 120 loop is great; multiple access routes (network) such as Atlanta Road as an alternative to I-75; CCT is necessary and used for family members who are blind or otherwise unable to drive; one can get around in Cobb and avoid using interstates; CCT is pretty good, but not as comprehensive as could be; East-West Connector was needed and was a great addition to the County’s system – prior to this road, west Cobb was rural because you couldn’t get there – however, now there are too many traffic lights on the East-West Connector. The Windy Hill extension provided a “huge” improvement.
- **What needs improvement?** – extent of CCT service (doesn’t go to Acworth); moved to Marietta specifically due to CCT service; need weekend and Sunday service; looking to the future, we need more transit beyond the current local bus service; some roads (Spring Road, East-West Connector, South Cobb Drive) the signals aren’t timed such that one can catch green at multiple intersections – often have to stop at every intersection; need light rail; need more bus routes.
- **Priorities for improving transportation** (The moderator distributed a handout with categories of investments). Traffic signals were very popular, and discussed. Limited responses for widening existing roads. Some discussion about improving mass transit, in order to reduce the number of

people driving. Very limited response to providing bike facilities. 5 people ranked improving local transit highest. It was noted that we need better transit for young people to access opportunities – such as jobs. Many people are transplants who have good impressions of the benefits of good transit from other cities, and believe we need that here. Generally have more people favoring improvements to local transit versus express bus service. Light rail was mentioned by several persons – could provide good option for Cobb; smaller than MARTA's heavy rail; could go from West Cobb to East Cobb.

- **Bus Rapid Transit (BRT)** – Beth described the basics of BRT, and of the proposed Connect Cobb BRT system. About 4 of 10 were already somewhat aware of BRT and the proposal in Cobb. One person said that they don't see that working as well as light rail. They mentioned that BRT would still be subject to traffic signals, and would therefore be delayed (they inferred that LRT could be timed to not be delayed at traffic signals). Beth mentioned that BRT would include some sort of signal priority which communicates with the traffic lights. The group seemed to not understand how this would work. One person referred to the East-West Connector as a good limited-access facility, and said we need more roads like that. One person recalled a previous proposal to make intersections grade-separated. Head nods suggested that other agreed that this is a good idea. An environmentally-friendly BRT could be completed in just a few years. LRT would take ten years. Sort of a split decision on BRT versus LRT.
- **How does transportation investment affect your business?** – transportation has become expensive, and it's harder to recruit people for low wage jobs due to the cost of getting to work; deliveries get delayed and some jobs are not taken because distance/time/cost of travel has gotten too large; it takes considerable time to get around Atlanta, or Cobb County; we must now plan ahead to account for travel time.
- **SPLOST – Has everyone heard of a SPLOST?** All nodded yes. **What does a SPLOST do?** The participants have a pretty good understanding of the 1% local option tax and what it's used for. They noted that it's used for more than just transportation. They also noted that the ballot includes some general categories and specific projects describing where and how it will be used. **Thinking about how SPLOST money has been used...are you generally happy with how that money was used?** Group mentioned certain projects which they think were funded with SPLOST – Big Shanty Road (they feel this was a great project), Floyd Road reconstruction, etc. One person suggested that the County could do a better job telling people what the money was used for. **Are we spending enough money on transportation?** If someone knew more about fixing traffic lights, we could make traffic better with very little money. Nobody felt the County is spending too much money on transportation. All agreed that the County could be spending and doing more on transportation. Too many projects are temporary or small fixes, and we need to invest in long-term solutions. One person shared an example of a major highway project in another state which was getting way ahead of the growth curve. Another person stated that Cobb County has always been playing "catch up", and been behind the curve. He further suggested that we should outline potential investments in a matrix, considering each potential project's benefits, and develop a priority list. **If it comes to a vote, should we renew the SPLOST?** All nodded "yes". Verbal responses included "Absolutely." "We have to" and "We won't attract business if we don't". Nobody disagreed with renewing the SPLOST. Some noted

that Cobb is no longer small and quaint – we are a big county and need significant transportation investments.

- **Other thoughts?** One person suggested (again) that we need to expand our transit routes. Another person suggested remote parking and express buses to serve the Braves stadium. Another person suggested we need to think about Cobb County as a metropolitan County, no longer just a suburb of Atlanta. Another person suggested we need to think regionally – we can't just fund everything locally; we need to fund regional initiatives on a regional or statewide scale.

Focus Group #2 – Young Adults

- Only about half the group has been in a focus group before.
- All participants drive almost everywhere they go. One participant sometimes walks up to distances of about 30 minutes.
- **How easy is it to get around in Cobb County?** Pretty easy. One person noted that it's getting crowded. One person noted that there is traffic everywhere. One person noted that there's lots of traffic near Cumberland and Smyrna; but, the Sandy Plains area and north of the 120 loop there is little traffic. Back roads have less traffic than major highways. Street lights work. It's good that we don't have the express lane like in Gwinnett County. Local streets are well maintained.
- **What needs to be improved?** More roads, especially with the Braves stadium coming soon. We need to expand roads on certain streets – Windy Hill, Spring Road, Cobb Parkway, Paces Ferry Road. Paces Ferry Road needs more than one lane. There should be expansion of roads where there are schools, because there is much traffic in and out of schools. Widening of Shiloh Road will be very helpful. They should increase CCT routes – more local routes. CCT doesn't go to many destinations, so it's not an option most of the time. They should extend MARTA (rail) to connect to Atlanta (this was said by several persons in different ways). Traffic signals are an issue on Cobb Parkway. **How about walking and biking?** Bicyclists should not have to ride on the sidewalk. It would be better to have bicycle lanes. Kennesaw is building walking trails, and we should have more of those. I wish we could lower the gas prices.
- **Priorities for improving transportation?** Nobody identified traffic signal timing as their top priorities. Most identified widening existing roads as the top priority. One person noted that they have observed the reduction in traffic congestion resulting from prior roadway expansion. Widening roads alleviates congestion. One suggested building more local roads. Everywhere. There needs to be more roads. More local roads would help reduce traffic on interstate highways. Almost all identified improvements to local bus service as a top priority. There should be service on Sundays. Timing or knowing the arrival time of a bus would be very helpful, such as an interactive app. The bus should arrive every 20 minutes – predictably. Public transportation is not commonly used or accepted as it is in some other places. One person noted that they did not know that public transportation exists in Cobb. Others seemed more familiar with CCT and MARTA. Perhaps buses should be able to pull off roads so that drivers are not waiting behind them when they are stopped. Several persons indicated desire for better express bus service.

- **BRT** – nobody seemed to know what BRT is, nor did they seem to know about the proposed Connect Cobb project. The moderator described BRT and the proposed Connect Cobb project. A handout illustrated these concepts. **What do you think about a BRT system?** Several persons said that sounds really good. It would be as fast as driving a car. It would be reliable. It would be a good way to get to Atlanta. There should be parking lots at some transit stations. The service should run late at night and on weekends. Will it run on Sundays? It is located along the most common/busy corridor in the County. There should also be a local CCT bus route which makes frequent stops. It would be really useful for people to get around the County without driving. Would it be affordable? Would you consider riding this? Almost everyone said “yes” without hesitation. Would it continue down Northside Drive? I don’t think it will be very popular until we have an entire bus system – a whole system in the metro Atlanta area. They don’t all have to be BRT; but the regional system needs to be more extensive. Local buses should also make stops at the BRT stations. It might not be popular enough. Perhaps there should be a MARTA (rail) station at Cumberland – that way a person could use the BRT in Cobb then the rail from Cumberland to Atlanta. It may take a while (perhaps many years) for people to get used to it. They need to advertise this system. I know many people who would use the bus if we had a better system. In cities like San Francisco or New York it is easier to use transit than to drive. Some think that rail from Cumberland to Atlanta would be faster than any type of bus, because there are no traffic lights.
- **SPLOST** – Who has heard of SPLOST? 6 out of 8 had heard of it. Two participants described their understanding of SPLOST – and they described it very well. It’s a local tax to be used for things like transportation, parks, facilities and public safety. Are you happy with how that money has been used? Yes. We see the signs on roadway projects everywhere. There is some mistrust of how tax money is sometimes used – referred to the SR 400 toll as an example. Two participants noted that they want to know where and how the money will be used. There was acknowledgment that in some cases, governments have misused tax dollars. Shiloh Road has been under construction for a long time now. (She also noted that it is a long road with a lengthy construction period.) There was a location near my house which was dangerous – they just finished the project and it is very much improved. Improvements require some temporary disruption, but do result in an improved condition.
- **Is Cobb County spending enough on our transportation system?** – All said that it should be increased. Several persons noted that with the Braves moving to Cobb, we will need some improvements to minimize inconvenience to nearby residents and businesses. Our population is also growing, so we’ll need to spend more money to keep up with population and business growth which includes more roads. More people also bring more taxes to help pay for these things.
- **Should Cobb vote to renew the SPLOST?** All said “yes”. But, they also said they are not certain that Cobb voters WILL vote yes. One said that he is worried that perhaps Cobb voters will not vote to renew the SPLOST. One noted that some people are concerned about the simple tax dollars. One person suggested that more people would vote for it if you narrowed the description to “widen roads and improve public transportation”. (I think she was referring to our definition of SPLOST.) Many like seeing those SPLOST signs along the roadways to see the tax

dollars in action. One person spoke in favor of having a more specific definition of the improvements planned for the proposed SPLOST. Parks are also important to me, because I have young children. There was some difference as to whether the SPLOST should focus on transportation, or should it include other types of improvements. One participant said that people need to be educated about BRT and express bus before they are asked to vote for the SPLOST. Most people suggested detail with the proposed SPLOST program. Need proper campaign and clear information.

- **Other thoughts or comments?** What motivated the proposed BRT project? In the end of the day, if there's not money to extend MARTA rail, then the proposed BRT is a good alternative. There was some discussion about the cost of building rail versus BRT.

Focus Group #3 – Cobb Voters

- Most have participated in a focus group before.
- **How do you get around in Cobb County?** Most drive to most destinations. One person also uses the bus. One carpools to work often.
- **What's best about transportation in Cobb County?** The roads are well maintained. The lights are well coordinated. There are alternate routes, or back roads, to get downtown – I-75, US 41, local roads. We have good connectivity to freeways are within 20 or 30 minutes to most key destinations.
- **What would you like to see improved in Cobb County?** First, immediate response – mass transit. What do you mean? In Manhattan, one can hop on an express and get downtown or to the airport in 30 minutes. Even in the middle of the night. One person said that they have never used MARTA. One person recalled their experience with using route 10 to get to Atlanta – that experience is rather antiquated as compared to other cities. CCT takes forever. One person said that they don't use MARTA because it's not as convenient or easy as driving – in other cities they use transit because it's easy and convenient to use. One does not use MARTA because it seems unsafe. In other states, the carpool lanes are free. Several persons said that they would gladly pay a toll to avoid congestion. And, most agreed that peak period congestion is a problem. One person said that they avoid travel during peak periods. Others said that they routinely alter their schedule in order to avoid congested periods.
- **Priorities for improving the transportation system?** – Only one person identified **traffic signal timing** as one of the top priorities. Many locations need a **turn signal (arrow)**. In many locations the lights are too long (the wait is too long). One person identified the need for **turn lanes** as a top priority. **Sidewalks?** One person identified this as a top priority. **Widening existing roads?** Four people identified this as a top priority. **New local roads?** Two persons identified this as a top priority. **Bike lanes?** No response. **Local bus service?** Most people identified this as a top priority. The local buses need to come at a higher frequency. Similarly, improved **express bus** was seen as a top priority by more than half the group. **BRT?** – Three persons identified this as a top priority. Persons noted that express or BRT (out of traffic) would be more convenient and more people would use it? Only three people indicated that they have heard of BRT from

another city. One person indicated that they believe BRT means that buses have their own lane and can travel efficiently.

- The moderator then described **BRT** and the proposed **Connect Cobb** system. Do you think this would be useful? I think this would be very useful, especially if you educate the user. **Is this something you would be likely to ride?** Split opinions. One person noted that their unpredictable schedule and regional travel would not allow them to use it. If I had to use five buses to get downtown, then I wouldn't use it. If I could ride one bus and it would be time efficient, then I would use it. I would take this regularly to the stadium. It would be even better if this Cobb County system would connect to future systems in other counties in the Atlanta region. I would be more likely to use it if it were rail. This person described good experiences on rail systems because of the speed and reliability. Several persons noted preference for rail transit. Several persons mentioned some awareness of Cobb Rides or other carpool and vanpool programs. More carpool incentive programs are wanted.
- **SPLOST** – Most persons indicated that they are aware of the SPLOST program. The described that they understand it's a local tax for a certain time period and for a certain list of improvements, including roads, parks, schools, etc. One person said that the idea of a local tax for certain local needs is a great idea. One person noted that the SPLOST tax is collected by many persons who spend money in Cobb but may live elsewhere. **Are you aware of the transportation projects which have been funded with SPLOST?** One person recalled seeing the SPLOST signs along roadway projects. Many agreed that they like the SPLOST road signs. One person did not know that SPLOST is used for things other than schools. One person noted that they understand that roads and bridges are very expensive. **Is the County spending enough or too much on transportation?** The County does have well maintained roads and bridges. Persons spoke well of money spent on resurfacing and maintenance. One person stated that we still have much congestion; so, perhaps we're not spending enough. **Do you think that Cobb voters should vote to renew the SPLOST?** Persons noted that with the Braves coming, we should vote to renew the SPLOST to provide much-needed improvements. They also noted that this vote would not add an additional 1%, but would continue the 1% we have currently. One mentioned that it is our responsibility to vote for it for the future and our children. Nobody spoke up to indicate objection to extending the SPLOST.
- **How much does transportation affect quality of life in Cobb County?** All agreed that it has a big impact. They discussed how your location decisions are critical – i.e. don't live too far from work. One person noted that their quality of life is missing the ability to walk somewhere. Anywhere. People should be able to walk or take transit to at least some destinations. At least to a coffee shop or store. Traffic is stressful and time consuming.
- **Any other thoughts?** Provide more express buses in general. Provide express lanes on the freeways. Provide more toll lanes as an option.