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Blog

[YP Perspectives: Public Transit in Indy](#)

Posted by [Emily Neitzel](#) on Sep 28, 2015 in [YP Perspectives](#) | [No Comments](#)

In preparation for Indy's [upcoming local elections](#), IndyHub's running YP Perspectives: The 2015 Indy Election Series. These articles explore important community issues that will be directly impacted by this election. We serve as a platform for these conversations. We care that you vote-not how you vote.



Recently, Indianapolis has been [in the spotlight](#) on multiple occasions for providing new transportation alternatives. Projects and services-providing increased options for getting around without owning a car-are popping up all over.

Mayor Ballard, a key advocate for these changes, has backed projects within the city such as the IndyGo downtown transit center and Blue Indy electric car stations. Outside of county lines he has joined with his regional counterparts to support [mass transit for Central Indiana](#) through the Indy Connect plan.

In 2010, when IndyGo was faced with serious funding issues, Mayor Ballard [proposed an interim solution](#) to avoid cuts to routes and an increase in bus fare.

Of course, Mayor Ballard hasn't done this all himself. Cooperation between the Mayor, the City-County Council and a host of nonprofit organizations, public agencies, and private business has been the driving force behind these changes.



But it hasn't been an entirely smooth ride, with [disagreements over the Blue Indy car-sharing program](#) being one of the most recent issues to divide council members and the Mayor.

And in spite of the miles of bike lanes and urban greenways, pedestrians [still face dangerous commutes](#) and bus passengers wish for extended hours and more frequent service.

With Mayor Ballard's term coming to an end and elections approaching in November, it will be up to our next mayor and city-county council to continue to work with local partners on transportation issues.

What challenges and opportunities will the next mayor face?

How can he help continue to build momentum towards a more comprehensive and inclusive transportation system for our city?

What problems does IndyGo face? And what's it like to be a passenger?



Bryan Luellen with IndyGo, YP in Indy

Thirty-one IndyGo routes form the backbone of alternatives to transportation by car in Indianapolis, and over the past five years the service has seen consistent growth in ridership. Just last year residents made [10.29 million trips](#) by bus, which broke previous records for ridership.

According to IndyGo's Director of Public Affairs Bryan Luellen, 75% percent of riders are transit-dependent, meaning that without bus service they would have to walk or find a ride to their destination. In spite of the uptick in ridership numbers, however, IndyGo and its riders alike admit there is room for improvement.

Elle Roberts has used IndyGo nearly every day for the past two years to commute to work. She has a car, but chooses to ride the bus to work because of lack of parking at her office. Plus, Roberts says, "I like the mobility and ease of commuting by bus and bike."

Having lived on different sides of town, Roberts notices that service is more frequent and convenient to and from her near east side home than it was when she lived on the city's northwest side.

Her observations hit on a key question facing IndyGo and the community, which Luellen summed up as, "Do we run in all areas where our service is needed? Or do we focus on providing a convenient and well-used service?" It is easier to provide a high quality transit service in the denser urban core areas; yet transit-dependent residents also live in the more suburban areas of Marion County. Should the goal be higher ridership in a limited area or more geographic coverage?

Currently, IndyGo's service offering is made up of 60% ridership-based and 40% coverage-based bus routes, but recent community meetings point towards a possible change to an 80%-20% split in priorities. Ultimately, a policy decision addressing these priorities will have to be made by the IndyGo board and the City-County Council.



Elle Roberts, IndyGo Rider, YP in Indy

For Roberts, the question doesn't have a simple answer. "I think millennials want to live in places with more reliable public transportation. I think more frequent, convenient service will encourage more people to make the choice to live in the urban core," she said. But she also notes that many students and families that she works with live far outside of the core downtown area and rely on IndyGo completely.

She would like to see a balance between the desire to attract new riders with amenities and more frequent, direct routes and the need to provide bus route coverage to riders across Indianapolis.

Luellen says that this is one way in which the next mayor can play an important role. "The next mayor and council need to be engaged in this conversation."

How are we paying for public transportation?

In spite of the critiques of its service, IndyGo operates efficiently within its limited budget and the environment at hand. About 18% of the proposed 2016 operating \$72.5 million budget comes from passenger fares, making the ridership/coverage question essential to the budget - more passengers

means more fare money to work with.

One important constraint on the budget is the state constitutional property tax cap, [passed in a 2010 referendum](#). Under this amendment, property taxes for homes and businesses are limited to 1% and 3% respectively.

While this saves taxpayers money overall across Indiana, it also puts a strain on local services such as IndyGo. Nearly 45% of IndyGo's proposed 2016 operating budget is made up of local property and other taxes; capping the tax rate forces the city to look to other means of maximizing funding.

One way to maximize property tax revenue within the county lines without raising rates is to change zoning rules to allow for new and denser development. Instead of raising taxes on the property that's already there, you add more taxable properties in the same space.

Luellen pointed out that the Metropolitan Development Commission recently adopted a land use policy that will allow for denser development to happen around future rapid transit stations. This [transit-oriented development](#) will provide an increased tax base for IndyGo's funding.

Speaking of rapid transit, what is the Red Line all about? Is it really happening?

Recently, [IndyGo announced](#) that in September they will submit an application for a federal grant worth approximately \$50 million to cover 80% of the cost of construction of the first step of a regional rapid transit system - the Red Line. The remaining 20% of costs would come from the state government.

The Red Line will be a [bus rapid transit line](#) stretching in its first phase from Broad Ripple to the University of Indianapolis. If the grant is obtained, construction of the Red Line will begin in 2017.

Bus rapid transit offers more flexibility and a lower cost to build than light rail transportation, while speeding up service through off-board fare collection and dedicated bus lanes. However, critics of the proposed Red Line worry that dedicated lanes on the selected route would take away space for on-street parking and for automobile traffic.

Seth Grannan, who currently relies on his car and Uber services for transportation, is one such opponent. He says he would prefer to have mass transit in Indianapolis, but worries that the BRT being planned for Indianapolis will not live up to its potential. "There are gold, silver, and bronze standards for BRT globally, but there's no actual requirement to stick to these standards here in the US," he said. "The city is being sold BRT but may not actually get a true BRT system."

In fall of 2016, a county-wide referendum could ask Indianapolis voters to decide whether to

increase the local income tax to provide for more mass transit lines passing through Indianapolis. The city-county council will have to call the referendum to have it put on the ballot. Then, if the referendum passes, the council would also have to enact the tax because it is a non-binding referendum, meaning it wouldn't automatically go into effect if passed.

If the referendum were passed and enacted, Luellen explained, the revenue would also enable IndyGo to eliminate the current problems with frequency of service and the hours of availability.

How can the next mayor best support public transportation?

The decisions to be made on the future of public transportation in Indianapolis are clearly not the next mayor's alone. The community and the city-county council will also be involved. But Luellen says that the mayor can still do quite a bit on his own. "There is a role for the mayor to play at the national level. Congress hasn't funded a long-term transportation bill. We come up on the deadline and congress authorizes an extension, but there isn't a long-term plan being created," he explained. "Mayors have to advance issues nationally and say this is important. Federal funding is an important part of what mayors can do."

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Upcoming Community Events

<p>DEC 31 Thu (http://indyhub.org/calendar/action~oneday/exact_date~31-12-2015/)</p>	<p>5:30 pm INCREDIPLEX New Year's Eve Early... @ Incrediplex (http://indyhub.org/event/incrediplex-new-years-eve-early-balloon-drop/?instance_id=4777)</p>
	<p>6:00 pm New Years Eve at Spoke & Steele @ Spoke & Steele (http://indyhub.org/event/new-years-eve-spoke-steele/?instance_id=4778)</p>
	<p>8:30 pm Circle City Athletics New Years Eve @ Indiana Roof Ballroom (http://indyhub.org/event/circle-city-athletics-new-years-eve/?instance_id=4743)</p>
<p>JAN</p>	<p>10:00 am The Colts VIP Tailgate @ The Crane Bay</p>

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Sun

(http://indyhub.org/calendar/action~oneday/exact_date~3-1-2016/)

(http://indyhub.org/event/colts-vip-tailgate-6/?instance_id=4343)

JAN

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Tue

(http://indyhub.org/calendar/action~oneday/exact_date~5-1-2016/)

7:30 pm American Opera w/ Cody Almond @ 10 Johnson Avenue Coffeehouse (http://indyhub.org/event/american-opera-w-cody-almond/?instance_id=4809)



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