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OPINION OF MAYOR DAVID BELLE ISLE

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PAGE 1 OF 2

FAITH IS FOR GOD, NOT TRANSIT

"Better to walk alone than with a crowd in the wrong direction." (Diane Grant).

Recently, I was the lone dissenting vote on a panel of all 14 Fulton County mayors and the Fulton County Commission to support the current MARTA plan. The vote was cast to support SB 330, which would open a path to increasing the Fulton County sales tax on all your purchases by a ¼ of a penny for 5 years and ½ a penny for the 35 years thereafter. This is a measure that would raise \$8 Billion when added to yet to be confirmed federal funds.

We all know that we have traffic challenge in Metro Atlanta. It's both good and bad. More traffic means the economy is healthy and people want to be here. But, of course, more traffic also means longer drives to home and work. So, we need to fix it. But how?

This proposed tax increase highlights that Fulton County has access, if so willing, to billions of transportation dollars. But, what is the most efficient way, the most cost-effective way, to fix the problem? Heavy rail? Bus-Rapid-Transit? Light rail? Managed lanes? Additional lanes?

We don't know. But, that has not stopped the drumbeat to adopt heavy rail by faith, by far the most expensive of the methods known. It comes at a price tag of over \$200,000,000.00 per mile. Yet, what we do know is that MARTA ridership has declined over the past 10 years. Less people are taking transit. Further, MARTA has yet to register a ridership of over 3% of the commuting population. More to the point, no independent study has been completed or attempted to determine or measure the traffic relief heavy rail, or any of its alternatives, might bring.

The GA 400 portion of the heavy rail alone is projected to be over \$2 Billion dollars. It might be cheaper to double deck GA 400 at that price. I'm not suggesting we do, but certainly, such a method would have a far greater impact on relieving actual traffic congestion.

What about jobs? Won't heavy rail bring jobs? Again, this seems to be an opinion backed by faith. I am not aware of any independent assessment of that claim, nor am I aware of any claim that other transit options would create less jobs than heavy rail. Nonetheless, more jobs, even if made possible by heavy rail, would certainly bring some number of additional cars. That is, unless, 100% of all new transit inspired jobholders exclusively limit their commutes to MARTA.

As for SB 330, here's what we need: (1) neutral ballot language without unproven claims of traffic relief and more jobs; (2) the flexibility to tax less than ½ a penny over the entire 40 years; (3) time to evaluate the proposal—no vote before 2017; and (4) the required consent of each affected city for determining the MARTA projects to be approved.

If we go down this path, we must call for a competent, professional independent study showing the reasonably expected traffic relief and economic benefit of more heavy rail. This study should compare that forecast with the alternatives, such as Bus-Rapid-Transit, light rail, managed lanes, and additional lanes. This way, if nothing else, we will one day know whether the heavy rail plan succeeded. More importantly, we can evaluate whether it's the best path forward. Faith is for God, not transit.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David Belle Isle". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "D" and "B".

David Belle Isle
Mayor