

Palm Bay calls for countywide half-cent tax for roads

Rick Neale, FLORIDA TODAY 5:09 p.m. EDT August 7, 2015



(Photo: FLORIDA TODAY file)

John Lazaridis lives on bumpy St. Andre Boulevard, a washboard dirt road near “The Compound” in Southwest Palm Bay. He says this rugged, rutted roadway becomes “undriveable” and “un-passable” after rainstorms — and his family is not happy.

“Every time a vehicle goes by, I literally have to turn my back — because I’m going to get it right in the face with all the dust and debris that comes from that road,” Lazaridis told the Palm Bay City Council on Thursday.

The city’s sprawling 851-mile road network is “sick” and “ill,” Councilman Tres Holton said. Engineers estimate at least 357 miles have failed and need to be rebuilt, and 167 more miles are in danger of failing. What’s more, the road-repair budget deficit clocks in at \$162 million.

Palm Bay leaders hope their counterparts at Space Coast city halls join their call for increased street funding. Thursday, City Council unanimously approved a resolution encouraging the Brevard County Commission to place a half-cent road-repair sales tax referendum on the November 2016 ballot.

A half-cent sales tax could annually generate \$17.5 million for the county and nearly \$14 million for distribution among Space Coast cities and towns. Palm Bay would receive \$4.2 million for roadwork, estimates indicate.

[Palm Bay studying \\$162 million road-repair deficit \(/story/news/local/2015/03/30/palm-bay-panel-studying-million-road-repair-deficit/70703076/\)](/story/news/local/2015/03/30/palm-bay-panel-studying-million-road-repair-deficit/70703076/)

“We’re the largest city. Most-populated city. The city with arguably the greatest road challenges. And there are potential allies out there. I know. I’ve talked to them,” said Holton, who introduced the resolution.

“Mayor (Henry) Parrish of Cocoa, Mayor (Kathy) Meehan of Melbourne, Mayor (Jim) Tulley of Titusville, and so many others that we up here know. And they’re looking at Palm Bay to kind of be the one to step out front first,” Holton said.

“We pass this resolution, I’m pretty confident that other municipalities will pass similar resolutions,” he said.

Holton cited the findings of Brevard County’s Blue Ribbon Advisory Board for Transportation Infrastructure, which issued recommendations in March 2014. The county has 283 miles of failed roads across its 1,110-mile network.

The group’s final report stated that the tax is “the only option that provides a reasonable attempt at closing the unfunded transportation backlog,” rather than gas taxes, impact fees or a public services tax.

Average annual cost per household: \$67.50. Holton said the monthly cost of \$5.63 is less than a McDonald’s Big Mac value meal.

The blue-ribbon committee cautioned that a sales tax is less politically expedient than other funding sources — indeed, passage could require multiple referendum attempts.

“We’ve got road problems. We’ve got a whole bunch of it. And we’ve got to take care of it,” Deputy Mayor Harry Santiago said.

[Palm Bay road maintenance fund may triple to \\$3 million \(/story/news/local/2015/07/29/palm-bay-road-maintenance-fund-may-triple-million/30825481/\)](/story/news/local/2015/07/29/palm-bay-road-maintenance-fund-may-triple-million/30825481/)

Phil Weinberg, chairman of Palm Bay’s Local Road Advisory Board, supported the sales tax resolution from the public-comment podium.

“There’s no simple solution. Now, I hate taxes as much as the next person. Maybe even more. But in order to fix our roads, we — residents in Palm Bay — are going to have to pay for it in one way or the other,” Weinberg said.

“This proposal would help to share the pain, and spread some of the pain all across the county,” he said.

City Council also endorsed a \$4.4 million road maintenance program for the next two years. The plan calls for \$3 million in repairs next year (totaling about 10 miles) and \$1.4 million the following year (7.3 miles).

Next year, 46 percent of repairs will occur in business and industrial areas. The road list includes reconstruction of St. Andre Boulevard from San Filippo Drive to Madden Avenue.

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