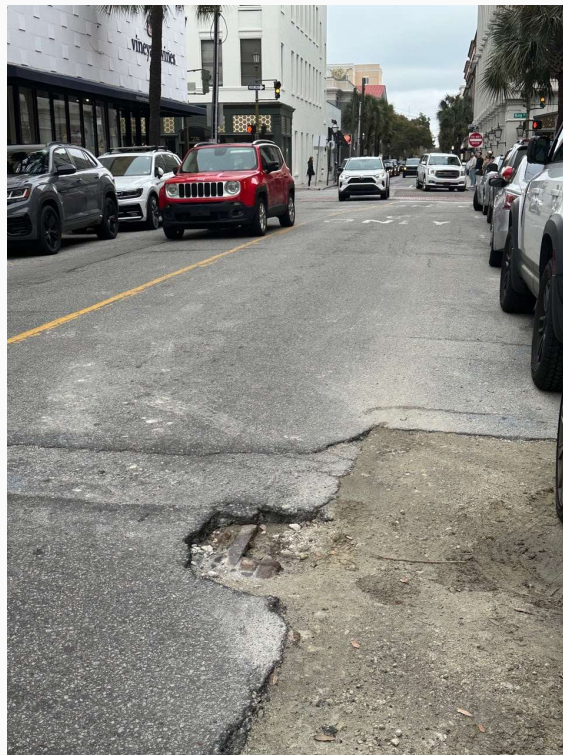


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CHS | Our Roads: Rougher or smoother? You decide.

by Jay Williams Jr.

You don't have to look to know the pavement under you is cracking, buckling, and crumbling. You can feel the bumps, ruts, and potholes the moment you drive across town.

Our streets and roads are in awful shape. Traffic is jammed up too often at too many intersections, and congestion is spreading everywhere. The reason is simple: both Charleston County's population and tourism are growing rapidly, but our infrastructure hasn't kept pace.

We're headed for gridlock. South Carolina's population is projected to grow by 29 percent by 2040, and that increase doesn't include more tourists. Our city streets and county roads, as well as your commute, will get worse unless we approve extending the half-cent Transportation Sales Tax on November 3.

You may not realize that Charleston County, not the city or state, handles most of the secondary road repaving, even inside the city limits of Charleston, Mount Pleasant, and North Charleston. It also prioritizes and contracts for most major road projects countywide.

And where does the money come from to fund all this work? It comes exclusively from the Transportation Sales Taxes and a small portion of gas taxes. None of your property taxes go toward resurfacing roads or major roadway improvement projects.

There is good news. The \$4.25 billion that the Transportation Sales Tax is projected to raise over the next 25 years would come from replacing the existing 2004 Transportation Sales Tax, which expires next year. Charleston County taxpayers would pay no more than they do now.

So, passing this tax should be a no-brainer, right? But Brian Turner, president and CEO of the Preservation Society of Charleston, believes the vote will be close. In the midst of an affordability crisis, this is still a tax. And the majority who should support it, including almost everyone who drives anywhere, seem complacent. Perhaps that's because too many people don't realize how important this referendum vote is.

The Original Sin:

Charleston County Council created a problem two years ago when the majority

attempted to foist an invasive and breathtakingly expensive I-526 Mark Clark extension on us, an unnecessary, multi-million-dollar highway through James and John's islands that voters roundly rejected. The voters remember.

But this time it is different. Really. After conducting a thorough analysis of road conditions and then seeking public input, this November referendum clearly outlines the major projects the tax will fund, and wording in the referendum ensures voters that the money raised will only be used as outlined on the ballot, not shifted to a mystery project:

If any project listed above cannot be accomplished, the amounts of Sales and Use Tax associated will be applied to any other project listed above.

As a result, almost every major civic, conservation, and preservation group, as well as the mayors of the three largest cities in Charleston County, are on board. If voters learn the facts in time, they'll be for it, too.

These are just some of the itemized projects:

In Charleston, these include the Battery Extension Project West (flood abatement); Calhoun Street and the Medical District; Maybank Highway Southern Pitchfork; Glenn McConnell Parkway at Magwood Road; U.S. 17 South widening (Dobbin to Main Road); Better North Bridge; and Hagood Avenue flooding mitigation.

In Mt. Pleasant, projects include reconfiguring the intersection of Johnnie Dodds Blvd. at Houston Northcutt, and implement resiliency measures for Long Point Road. In North Charleston, the Rivers Avenue railroad overpass at Durant Avenue makes the list.

The Transportation Sales Tax proposal allocates \$2.625 billion for infrastructure projects, \$858 million for transit, \$690 million for Greenbelt preservation, and \$77 million for bike and pedestrian improvements.

More benefits:

For Turner, the Greenbelt program matters because it helps preserve what remains of our county's rural character. This program will preserve forests, farmland, marshes, and create parklands, as it permanently protects that acreage from development for houses, apartments, and businesses—which create more traffic, the need for expensive infrastructure like roads, water, and sewers, as well as added police, EMS, fire protection, and other services.

Those are some of the major projects, but what about our streets and roads? In 2021, the County's Pavement Condition Index (PCI) stood at 70 percent. The PCI is exactly what it sounds like. This year, the PCI has dropped to 63 percent, and 40 percent of our roads are in "poor" or "very poor" condition. You probably don't need the PCI to tell you that.

Maintaining all the streets and roads in Charleston County at the current 63 percent PCI would cost \$27.5 million annually, yet we're spending less than \$10 million annually to restore and repave them.

Street and road maintenance funding comes from two sources: a portion of the state's Gas Tax (3.99 cents per gallon) and the Transportation Sales Taxes.

But without additional funding, the PCI will keep dropping. Voting yes on this referendum would effectively extend the 2004 Transportation Sales Tax and generate an additional \$15.6 million annually for road maintenance, rural roads, and safety improvements. That wouldn't get us all the way to what's needed, but it's a critical step.

There is more good news. Visitors and tourists would pay over one-third of the Transportation Sales Tax.

Construction costs are rising rapidly, and more people are coming. We can't wait to act to improve our streets, roads, and infrastructure. Vote "Yes" on the Transportation Sales Tax referendum on November 3.
