

Charleston County's 2024 Half-cent Transportation Sales Tax Referendum

FACTS VS. FICTION

As Charleston County residents prepare to vote on the \$5.4 billion referendum this November, it's essential to separate facts from fiction. This guide debunks common myths surrounding the referendum.

Fiction: "This is not a new tax."

- **FACT:** It is a new tax that would replace a current tax that is expected to sunset in 2027 or 2028. Passing this tax would continue to cost inflation-weary households \$1,200 per year.

Fiction: "Tourists will pay for a big portion of this tax."

- **FACT:** When residents go to the store to buy groceries, there is no "locals tax discount" for them. If this referendum passes, residents will still pay the full 9% sales tax imposed in Charleston County.

Fiction: "Building more roads will not encourage more development that will make traffic worse"

- **FACT:** If you want to see what lies ahead, just look at the overdevelopment of Mount Pleasant since the completion of I-526. Or open Google Maps during rush hour and see where the red lines are. They are on I-526, I-26 and highways of this nature which induce development, which attracts people who need to drive their cars, which leads to increased traffic.

Fiction: "More spending on large transportation projects will not escalate suburban sprawl and will not harm the character of Charleston County."

- **FACT:** Atlanta, Charlotte and Houston are just a few places that have extensive road networks. They also have extensive suburban sprawl. Furthermore, they have each lost their character. Only developers want this to happen to Charleston County, not the residents.

Fiction: "Charleston County has performed well on road projects listed in previous transportation sales taxes."

- **FACT:** Charleston County residents are paying the maximum allowed transportation sales tax today, yet road and mobility projects are not getting done. In 2016 voters approved a \$2.1 billion transportation sales tax. In the 8 years since, the county has only completed _____ Of the remaining projects they defunded 2 of them and pushed 3 of them into the 2024 tax. The County needs to show that they can actually perform on road projects before residents give them even more money.

Fiction: "The sales tax equally benefits all parts of Charleston County."

- **FACT:** The County would allocate \$3.67 billion of the tax for road projects, which includes the financing. Some areas of the County receive almost none of that funding. For example, Mount Pleasant will receive less than 5% of the total to build less than 2.5 miles of roadway. Awendaw, Edisto Island, Folly Beach, Hollywood, Isle of Palms, Meggett, McClellanville, Peninsular Charleston, Sullivan’s Island, and Ravenel will receive nothing.

Fiction: “The referendum is not being rushed.”

- **FACT:** According to the County, the current sales tax does not sunset until at least 2027. The County could have easily waited until 2026 to put a new tax referendum on the ballot. The reason it is being rushed is because of the Mark Clark Extension. The State wants immediate assurances that the County has the funds in place for this mega-project. This amplifies that the referendum is all about the Mark Clark Extension rather than providing adequate funding for road improvements, mass transit and land conservation.

Fiction: “The referendum is not about funding the Mark Clark Extension.”

- **FACT:** With financing, the Mark Clark Extension will consume almost half of the \$5.4 billion tax. This takes much-needed funds away from other road projects as well as from mass transit and land conservation. Furthermore, it is the only priority project. listed in the ordinance. That means that if there are any cost overruns associated with the Mark Clark Extension (and what multi-billion-dollar project doesn't have these?), the funds for the other efforts will be even further reduced. With such a large portion of the tax allocated to the Mark Clark Extension the County has made this tax almost exclusively about the Extension.

Fiction: “The Mark Clark Extension will not take funding away from other road projects.”

- **FACT:** The County and municipalities have identified over \$2 billion in needed road projects from the 2024 tax. After allocating funds to the Mark Clark Extension, there was only a limited amount of money available for these projects. So, the County pared the list down to \$1.2 billion in projects but then only allocated \$800 million for them. Thus, funding for the Mark Clark Extension resulted in \$800 million of projects not being included for funding and a budget shortfall of \$400 million on day one for the remaining projects. This is before inevitable cost overruns. All of this is because the funds for these much needed projects were given to the Mark Clark Extension.

Fiction: “There is adequate funding in the tax to improve existing roads, intersections, and bridges.”

- **FACT:** The tax would allocate \$26 million per year to fund all “bike/ped projects, intersection improvements, local paving, resurfacing/pavement management and rural roads”. Yet the County has shown that just to maintain the road surfaces. And each intersection can cost \$5 million to improve. The \$26 million per year (for a total of \$650 million) is woefully inadequate to fund the improvement of our existing roads and intersections. And it doesn’t even address the cost for bike/ped projects or rural roads. Again, funds for these much-needed efforts have been diverted to the Mark Clark Extension.

Fiction: “There is adequate funding in the tax for mass transit.”

- **FACT:** In the 2016 transportation sales tax, mass transit was allocated 29% of the total funds. In the 2024 tax, the County wants to reduce this to 12%. This reduction is proposed despite the for five additional bus rapid transit lines in the County. If the County is serious about providing mass transit, then they must adequately fund this effort. This tax does not provide sufficient funding to accomplish this.

Fiction: “There is adequate funding in the tax for land conservation.”

- **FACT:** In the 2004 transportation sales tax, land conservation was allocated 17% of the total funds. In the second sales tax approved in 2016, this was reduced to 10%. In the 2024 tax, the County wants to reduce this even further to 8%. This reduction is proposed despite the soaring cost of land and the widespread support for land protection. If the County is serious about conserving land, then they must adequately fund this effort. This tax does not provide sufficient funding to accomplish this.

Fiction: “All these road improvements will be done as soon as voters approve the tax.”

- **FACT:** The County has not provided a timeline for any of the projects. Indeed, they have "Various factors like available funding, financing of the Mark Clark extension, and other factors, will determine when these projects could begin construction." Perhaps it could be better stated as "**when or even if** these projects could begin construction".

Fiction: “This tax will solve all the congestion problems in the County, especially on Johns Island.”

- **FACT:** shows that after the completion of the Mark Clark Extension, it will be gridlocked during morning and evening rush hours. And the roads to access it on Johns Island will also be gridlocked. That means residents from Johns, Kiawah, Seabrook and Wadmalaw Islands won't even be able to get to the Extension. Furthermore, US-17 (Savannah Hwy) will have worse gridlock than it does today. As a result, there will be even more traffic using River Road from northbound Savannah Hwy.

Fiction: “This tax will improve traffic issues in downtown Charleston.”

- **FACT:** There is no money (\$0) in the tax for road projects downtown. In fact, according to the SCDOT, the traffic will be even worse since the vehicles per day at James Island Connector and Calhoun Street will go from 14,500 to 49,674.

Fiction: “Residents will vote on a list of projects.”

- **FACT:** The referendum does not list any road projects. The only list of projects is tucked into the ordinance County Council approved when it finalized the referendum. Council can add or subtract from that list by amending the ordinance as they see fit. There will be not be a list of projects for voters when they go to the ballot box.

Fiction: “The County must build the 12 projects listed in the ordinance.”

- **FACT:** The County is under no obligation to undertake any of these projects. Indeed, they have eliminated road projects that were listed in 2004 and 2016 sales tax ordinances.

Fiction: “Projects planned with this tax would not destroy acres of wetlands, take portions of a county park or ruin rural communities.”

- **FACT:** The Mark Clark Extension would take 38 acres of wetlands, take 32 acres of the James Island County Park, and fully or partially take 92 properties.

Fiction: “The Mark Clark Extension is an interstate highway.”

- **FACT:** The Mark Clark Extension will be a 45-mph road with a signalized, at-grade crossing at Riverland Drive on James Island. It would not be an interstate highway.

Fiction: “The Mark Clark Extension will include a bike-ped path.”

- **FACT:** There is no guarantee a path will be included in the project. This was shown to be the case for the recently approved Main Road project that runs between West Ashley and Johns Island. After promising for years that a bike-ped path would cross the Stono River on the Limehouse Bridge, the County deleted that portion of the project upon contract award, highlighting once again the trust issues residents have with the County.

Fiction: “The tax is required to last 25 years.”

- **FACT:** The State sets a maximum term of 25 years for the tax, but Counties are free to set a lower term. For example, Beaufort County had taxes with a 6-year term and Berkeley County had taxes with a 7-year term. The shorter term allows these Counties to show their residents that they are delivering on their road project promises prior to requesting additional tax funds from them.
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