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Cover Story

3 big ideas: Will we pay for them? (Video)

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[Cameron Hardy](#) rides Metro's No. 19 bus at least twice a day, seven days a week to his job working security in a downtown office building and to his paralegal classes at Cincinnati State Technical & Community College .

Some nights he has to walk a mile in the dark to his home in Mount Airy.

"They stop so early," Hardy said of Metro . "I get off at 11. We need them to run longer. Every bus is basically crowded. They need to make it a lot more frequent."

Hardy knows that the region's largest transit agency is considering a service expansion throughout Cincinnati and Hamilton County, but he also knows taxpayers will be asked for money this year to build new parks and next year to send every child to preschool.

Hardy said he's concerned that Metro and Preschool Promise, which is something he backs as well, will be ignored for the parks levy.

"Campaigning for all three is going to exhaust the community," he said. "After this passes, they're not going to want to raise taxes anymore. I understand that. I don't want to tax myself to death."

Seven years after the Great Recession's official end, three groups believe the need is great enough, the economy is strong enough and the political climate is favorable enough to ask voters to pay for brand-new programs aimed at transforming Cincinnati.

If any succeed, they will have bucked the city's skepticism about big projects, a strong anti-tax sentiment and potentially set the city and region on a course to address glaring weaknesses, particularly its 53 percent child poverty rate and limited transportation system.

Over the next 14 months, voters likely will see three new levies to pay for these ideas. In November, they will decide on Mayor [John Cranley](#)'s charter amendment and permanent, 1-mill property tax increase to fund city parks and other capital projects.

In November 2016, when high voter turnout is expected because of the presidential election, Hamilton County voters could see the Metro expansion tax.

Also next November, city voters probably will see a tax levy with a goal will be to fund preschool for every resident who wants their child to have it, regardless of income level. The campaign is known as the Preschool Promise.

Supporters of the latter two measures have yet to draft formal versions of their proposals but task forces are working right now to iron out the specifics and present more-polished proposals to the public. The city parks levy is on the ballot and running into increased opposition from both progressives and anti-tax conservatives. It could turn out to be a more contentious battle than was expected given the ease with which signatures were gathered to put it before voters.

Cranley says the parks levy is necessary because state government slashed funds that go to cities. As a result, Cincinnati prioritized police, fire and roads, "but that leaves the parks budget at risk," he said.

"This levy will also allow us to make transformative new investments like bike trails, which improve property values and quality of life," Cranley said.

Cranley declined to say whether approval of the parks levy will make voters less likely to back the other two ideas or whether going first carries an advantage for the parks levy. He says he backs all three ideas.

"Depending on the details, I support a dedicated county transit tax for enhanced bus service and the Preschool Promise," he said.

Backers of the other measures profess not to be concerned about the potential of tax fatigue or that the proposals will cannibalize each other.

"I don't think it's an either/or," said [Stephanie Byrd](#), a Preschool Promise steering committee leader and executive director of the United Way of Greater Cincinnati's Success by Six program. Success by Six helps parents with their child's early development. "We're talking about the future of our community. What we're talking about is how we continue to maintain the steam that we've seen in the last 10 years to make Cincinnati a better place."

Through independent studies, Metro's governing board aims to educate itself first about what the community's transportation needs are when it comes to getting people to jobs and then share what it has learned, said [Jason Dunn](#), chairman of the Southwest Ohio Regional Transit Authority.

A 2012 Brookings Institution study concluded that three of four working-age Greater Cincinnati residents cannot get to work in less than 90 minutes via transit.

"Cincinnati has got to get out of the mentality that bus transportation is for poor people," Dunn said.

But anti-tax crusaders don't plan to sit on the sidelines, as they did during the 2014 campaign to fund the restoration of Union Terminal with a five-year 0.25 percent tax. It was the first tax increase Hamilton County voters approved since the 1996 sales tax increase that funded construction of the two stadiums.

State Rep. [Tom Brinkman Jr.](#), who co-founded the Coalition Opposed to Additional Spending and Taxes, noted that the parks, Preschool Promise and Metro levies all will be for new taxes to fund new programs. Voters also could see higher tax levies for existing government, such as Hamilton County's park system, or Cincinnati schools in the coming years, he said.

"It's going to be a really big number out there," Brinkman said. "From an anti-taxer perspective, I'm disappointed we have all of them. But maybe it's to our advantage. The more tax proposals there are, the more people are going to say the hell with all of them."

Some potential allies wonder about the timing.

"Everyone's trying to ride the presidential election year," said [Peter McLinden](#), executive secretary-treasurer of the Cincinnati AFL-CIO Labor Council and a member of the task force studying Metro. "Based on Cincinnati's history, it may be too much, too fast."

While Cincinnati voters are regarded as more progressive than their county counterparts, as recently as 2011 city voters amended the charter to prevent a potential tax in the form of a garbage fee from coming to fruition.

Wide support from the political and business communities is no guarantee of success. In 2007, county voters rejected a sales tax increase to build a new county jail. The Republican and Democratic parties, the Charter Committee and business groups backed it. In nearly all of those elections, COAST and the local NAACP participated in or led the anti-tax campaign.

Preschool Promise supporters want and believe Cincinnati business leaders must be on board for their proposal to have a shot. There was skepticism early on, said Leslie Maloney, senior vice president of the Carol Ann and Ralph V. Haile Jr./U.S. Bank Foundation and its education program manager. Supporters presented the Cincinnati Business Committee and the Cincinnati Regional Business Committee, whose focus has been on K-12 education issues, with a poll to show there was public support for the Preschool Promise.

"I think it was just a matter of not getting them on board early enough," Maloney said of the business community, "and going out and polling ... an earnings tax without really having a conversation with them. Rightly so, (they said) 'Who are you to come and say we need an earnings tax?'"

Preschool Promise supporters have commissioned more research to make the case, including a more-detailed examination of the program's return on investment. It will contain details like how much more the community would get if it paid for full pre-school days instead of half days and universal preschool instead of a program targeted at children with certain needs.

"They're much more on board" today, Maloney said of the business community's comfort level with the idea.

[Jill Meyer](#), the new CEO of the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber, said the proposals are not

surprising for a city on the rise. The chamber endorsed the parks levy, and Meyer expects it will weigh in on the other ideas if they reach the voters.

"We collectively have been through tough economic times. We dug to the bottom to find out what makes us tick, what's going to make us better and, as a community, what's going bring new companies to this region and keep them here," Meyer said. "You're going to start to identify things that put you ahead of the next city ... that aren't meat and potatoes.

"Meat and potatoes are necessary. You have to have streets that work. The desire and push for things beyond the basic necessities is just a recognition of the competitive nature of what this region is up against. This is what people want and need to live happy lives. It's also listening to the desires of people who would say, 'I would move to Cincinnati, but...'"

Wetterich covers government and politics, transportation and downtown development.