

Central Dane County Regional Transportation Authority (RTA): Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

What is a Regional Transit Authority?

It is an entity that can fund, build and/or operate transit across municipal boundaries, and can use a sales tax to support itself. RTAs are common around the country, but they are new to Wisconsin. This year's state budget includes language allowing local governments to create RTAs in several areas, including central Dane County.

Where does the Dane RTA stand today?

The state's enabling legislation allows the Dane County Board of Supervisors to decide whether to create an RTA. County Board Chair Scott McDonnell has introduced a resolution to do so. That resolution will come to a vote at the Board meeting at 7 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 5, in Room 201 of the City-County Building, 210 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. in Madison.

What will the resolution do?

It will create the Dane RTA as a new governmental entity. The RTA board makeup is specified in the state's enabling legislation: Two members appointed by Dane County, two by the city of Madison; one each by Fitchburg, Middleton and Sun Prairie; one by the governor; and one by the Cities and Villages Association.

What areas will be covered by the RTA?

State law sets out the initial boundaries, which roughly correspond to the metro Madison transportation planning area – about half of Dane County. (See map.) Other municipalities will be able to join if they wish.

Can the County Board determine the membership of the RTA or who appoints members?

No. The RTA board makeup is specified in the state's enabling legislation, as are the authorities who make the appointments. The County Board can't change that.

Why is the County Board creating an RTA now?

Creating the RTA now is necessary in order to have a future referendum on a financing the RTA. As a new governmental entity, the RTA will put the referendum on the ballot.

What power will the new RTA have?

It will have the power to levy a half-cent sales tax to support transit. But the resolution states, and RTA appointing authorities agree, that it will not enact a tax until after a referendum, which it will place on a future ballot in the area covered by the RTA.

What will the RTA do between now and the election?

After board members are appointed, the board will meet with staff from the existing Transportation Planning Board to review transit plans and hold the referendum. Without taxing authority, it will not be able to implement any transit plan or operate transit.

What will the referendum say?

The RTA board will determine the specifics, but in general it will ask voters whether a sales tax of up to a half-cent per dollar should be levied to support RTA activities.

Could the RTA levy property taxes to build and run transit?

By state law, the RTA will not be able to levy property taxes. Currently, transit is funded through a combination of sources including farebox revenue, state and federal contributions, local funding, advertising and contracting. The RTA is only authorized to consider a sales tax; local governments might want to continue supporting transit in some way with property tax revenues, but that will be up to them.

Will the RTA build or operate commuter rail? How will it relate to Madison's Metro bus service?

These are some of the questions the RTA board will have to address. Around the country, some RTAs simply fund transit agencies, which operate independently. Others build and operate various modes of transit directly.