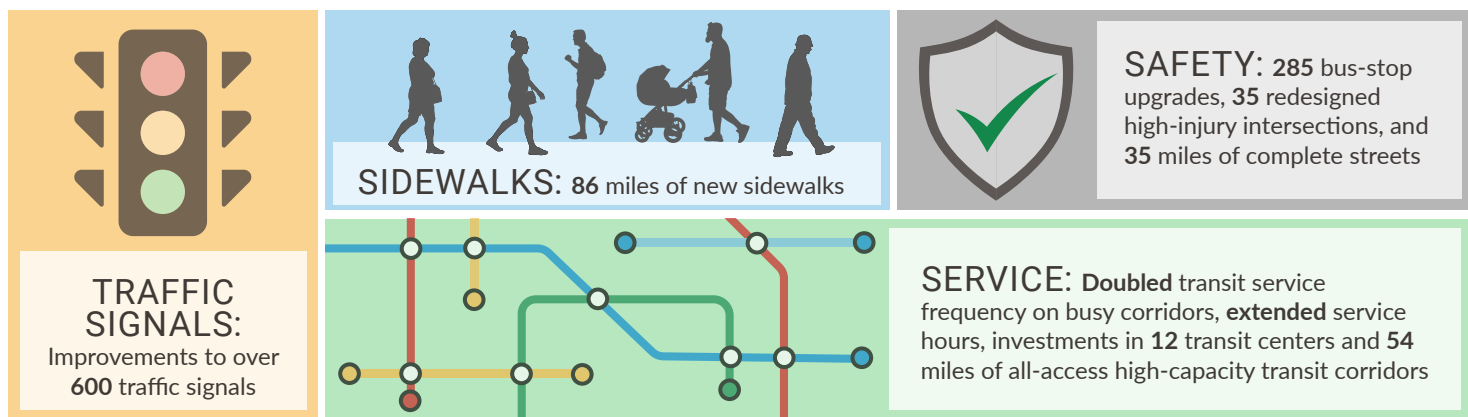


In November 2024, Nashville became the first Tennessee city to secure dedicated revenue for transit when 66% of voters approved the city's *Choose How You Move* transportation improvement plan.¹ Estimated to generate approximately **\$152 million per year** through a half-cent sales tax increase, bond proceeds, and federal and state funding, the plan equips Nashville with the funding necessary to deliver a comprehensive multimodal transportation system for the city's residents.²

Funding, however, isn't the only ingredient in the recipe for building a successful transit system. Fortunately, there are other cities who have passed transit referendums that Nashville can learn from.

**Nashville's 2024 *Choose How You Move* Transportation Improvement Program—
estimated to generate \$152 million a year from a half-cent tax increase—
includes major investments in sidewalks, traffic signals, safety, and transit service.**

Tennessee's 2017 IMPROVE Act enabled Tennessee cities to generate new revenue specifically for transit if voters approved a "Transit Improvement Program."



Source: *Choose How You Move*, Nashville's Transportation Improvement Program

ThinkTennessee interviewed transit agencies, city officials, and experts from Indianapolis, Austin, and Phoenix, all of whom have also passed dedicated funding referendums and have successfully delivered transformative transit projects and service improvements. This research report shares their lessons learned and key takeaways to help inform Nashville's team as implementation on the plan continues.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 1 City leadership should set a clear vision for success, build an effective governance structure, and anticipate and navigate obstacles.
- 2 Transit agency culture must shift to empower staff, foster collaboration, invest in capacity, and relinquish the scarcity mindset.
- 3 Continue to build trust with the community by overcommunicating, celebrating early wins, and engaging citizen advisory committees.
- 4 Project implementation needs a north star: building a world-class transit system.

City leadership should set a clear vision for success, build an effective governance structure, and anticipate and navigate obstacles.

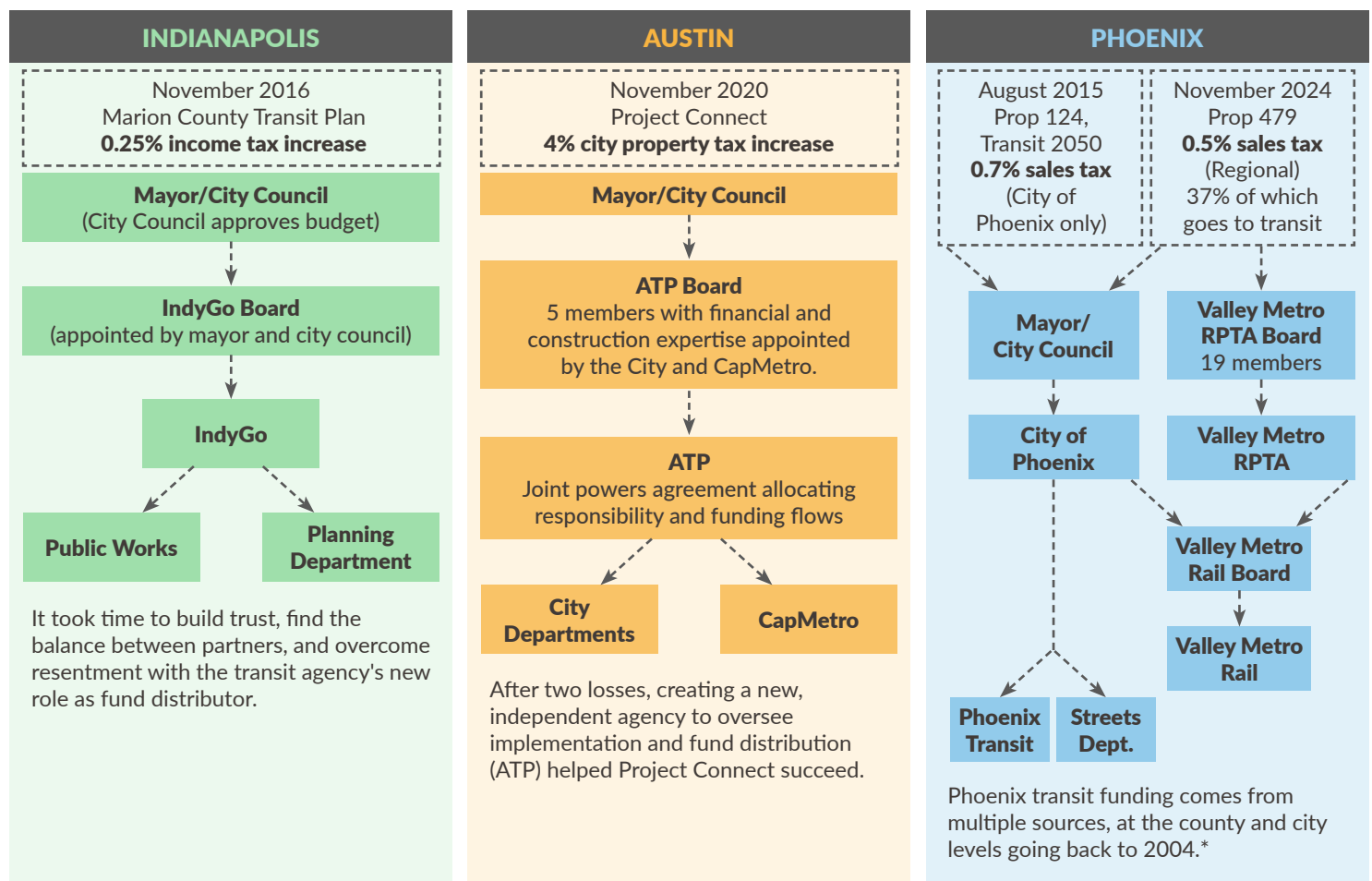
Interviewed cities shared three recommendations for launching a successful transit improvement plan: **build the governance structure that maximizes accountability and effective implementation, identify and empower a strong transit leader, and anticipate and get ahead of obstacles, particularly funding challenges.**



Governance structures enable the leadership and transparency needed for effective implementation but differ based on the context in each city.

Decisions on whether to house transit implementation leadership within transit agencies, other city agencies, or to create an independent entity reflect each city's unique context. No matter the structure, it should empower the leadership and enable the transparency needed for implementation.

Indianapolis, Phoenix, and Austin created different models of governance to oversee the implementation of their transit referendums.



* Maricopa County voters first approved dedicated funding for transit in 2004 (Prop 400) and renewed it in 2024 (Prop 479). City of Phoenix voters approved the Phoenix Transportation 2050 plan in 2015. As of 2012, the Regional Public Transportation Authority (RPTA) and Valley Metro Rail jointly operate under the same organizational structure (Valley Metro). It is important to note, regional funding cannot be used for light rail operations and maintenance. Multiple city jurisdictions in the Phoenix region have dedicated funding for transit, they are not included here due to space constraints.

Source: Interviews and correspondence with select transit agency and city officials. See endnotes for more.



A strong transit champion is needed to set the vision and maintain political will for implementation.

Strong leaders set the vision, empower staff, and maintain the political will to navigate the obstacles and successfully implement the projects. Interviewed cities noted that these roles can come from city or transit agency leadership or strong transit champions within the community.



The chamber of commerce has served as a long-term transit advocate.

In 2009, IndyChamber created a Central Indiana Transit Task Force of local business leaders to find solutions to the city's mobility needs and improve the region's economic competitiveness.³

This helped establish the chamber as an enduring transit champion for IndyGo. They played a crucial role organizing support for the 2016 transit referendum and supported IndyGo against legislative efforts to prohibit BRT corridors.



Anticipate implementation challenges, particularly when it comes to funding. Be transparent about them, and build the internal expertise to get ahead of them.

Funding revenues and cost estimates are often projected over 15 to 25 years, a challenge to predict accurately. Cities have better success when they adequately anticipate, prepare for, and communicate inevitable funding challenges to the public. Interviewees stressed the benefit of building the financial infrastructure in-house to better ensure transit agencies' ability to plan for the unexpected.



The Maricopa Association of Governments' (MAG) in-house financial modeling team responds to needs quickly.

Rather than rely on consultants, MAG brought its financial modeling team in-house, allowing them to conduct more frequent refreshes of costs and revenues and anticipate and respond to challenges more quickly. They collaborate with city officials and are transparent when reprioritization decisions are needed.



Transit agency culture must shift to empower staff, foster collaboration, invest in capacity, and relinquish the scarcity mindset.

Transit agencies and city departments that are used to limited funding find themselves in a new reality post-referendum where projects can come to fruition. Interviewees said navigating this agency culture shift requires three key elements: **empowering departmental staff to make important technical decisions and foster interdepartmental collaboration, investing in internal capacity, and shifting out of a scarcity mindset.**



Empower staff to make technical decisions and foster interdepartmental collaboration.

Transit improvement plans involve multiple partners and agencies. Collaboration—both within and across agencies—and ensuring everyone is at the table from day one working together is key to success. All levels of staff, not just department heads, must be empowered to make decisions so as to avoid bottlenecks.



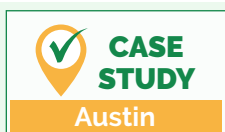
IndyGo created a new division to boost internal capacity and move projects forward.

IndyGo hired new staff and created a Planning and Capital Projects division to oversee long-term planning, capital project development and implementation, and strategic plan management.



Invest in internal staff capacity.

Transit agencies face an increased need for staffing and capacity to deliver projects on time and on budget. Interviewees highlighted the importance of investing in capacity and appropriately balancing building in-house expertise with engaging consultants to best fit long-term needs.⁴



With Project Connect's passage, CapMetro doubled staff.

CapMetro increased from 363 FTEs in 2020 to an estimated 677 FTEs in 2025 to support expanded service and a redesigned operations model that brought contracted positions in-house.⁵



Relinquish the scarcity mindset.

Before dedicated funding is approved, transit agencies often operate in scarcity mode with limited resources. Interviewees shared this mindset takes a while to overcome, and that the quicker leadership recognizes the needed shift, the sooner agency culture can adapt to empower all staff to be bold and make decisions that are in the best interest of improved transit service.



Let's create a world-class transit system for a world-class city.



Continue to build trust with the community by overcommunicating, celebrating early wins, and engaging citizen advisory committees.

Communities must trust that transit agencies can deliver improvements and be good stewards of public dollars. Interviewees highlighted building trust with transparency and accountability by committing to: **communicating regularly, showing progress with quick wins, and engaging with citizen advisory committees.**



Communication is key. Don't shy away from hard conversations.

Regular communication, particularly in the early years and even with hard conversations about finances or delays, can help deepen trust. Interviewees stressed it is important to set realistic project timelines and have clear expectations. Underpromising and overdelivering will lead to the community reaching the point of "just do it." Then the city will know they've started to earn the public's trust.



Going back out to the community repeatedly has led to an attitude from the community of 'we expect it, we want it, just build it, we trust your decisions', which was a turning point for the implementation process.



Highlight quick wins to show tangible progress to the community.

Early on, it is important to identify "quick wins"—projects without much delay or controversy. These help show progress, get staff and the community used to transit successes, and show change is possible. Interviewees emphasized the importance of adding service frequency early and shared that delivering popular improvements aided in building trust.



Our philosophy was: no victory was too small



Phoenix, Indianapolis, and Austin chose different projects to implement quickly, but all demonstrated successes and possibilities.



PHOENIX



Designed the 50th Street light rail station in partnership with Ability 360, the state's largest resource center for people with disabilities, and with community input.⁶

AUSTIN



Implemented projects with little capital expense, including new on-demand pickup neighborhood service zones and community-led TOD projects to increase ridership quickly.⁷

INDIANAPOLIS



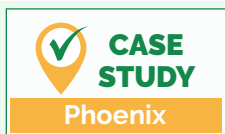
IndyGo collaborated with the Department of Public Works, converting eight downtown one-way streets to two-way, complete streets with bike lanes and sidewalk improvements.⁸

Source: Interviews and correspondence with select transit agency and city officials. See endnotes for more.



Engage the community through citizen advisory committees.

By communicating regular updates, shifts in plans, and soliciting feedback at committee meetings, citizen advisory committees can help facilitate communication between the city and the public and improve transparency and accountability.



A Citizens Transportation Commission oversees project implementation and guides officials.

Phoenix created a 15-member Citizens Transportation Commission to represent key communities and oversee T2050 implementation. The commission determines priority needs, oversees fund expenditures, and makes recommendations to public officials on plan elements.⁹



Project implementation needs a north star: building a world-class transit system.

Implementing transit improvement plans requires tough decisions and flexibility. Implementation advice from interviewees included, **focusing on a frequent bus network, implementing high-capacity transit corridors, and being flexible without compromising service quality.**



A frequent bus network is the backbone of a high-quality transit system.

Austin and Indianapolis prioritized gaining bus riders by changing routes, adding frequency, and extending service hours. With careful planning and adherence to quality transit principles, cities can maximize performance. Interviewees stressed the pressure to return to lower-frequency coverage models never goes away, but making the case for frequent transit networks gets easier.



When planning Bus Rapid Transit (BRT), don't fall prey to "BRT creep."

"BRT creep" is when design quality becomes downgraded during the planning phase, with detrimental impacts to service quality. Cities recommended adhering to the five sacred pillars of BRT: center-running dedicated lanes, level boarding platforms, off-board ticketing, transit-priority signals, and turn restrictions at key intersections and stressed that linking high-capacity transit corridors through the downtown core will maximize ridership.¹⁰



Some try to pull us back to the "coverage" model. We will always be in that tug of war. So much of the change has been educational. We sit down with them, walk them through the changes. They start to understand.



IndyGo developed the Red Line, a center-running BRT, maximizing ridership and connectivity.

Focused on maximizing ridership, Indianapolis expedited the construction of the Red Line BRT. Operating in dedicated lanes with 15-minute frequency and running through downtown, it connects multiple regions of the city. Though development faced challenges, the project serves an estimated one out of every four jobs in the county, increased ridership, and proved premium transit was worth the investment.¹¹



Be flexible without compromising on quality.

Continuing to prioritize and reprioritize in response to existing opportunities and limitations is key to successful implementation. Interviewees stressed learning how to be flexible without compromising on high-quality transit.



It is really important to keep re-prioritizing. We are constantly doing refreshes and asking "is this project still valid?"



Learning lessons and best practices from cities who have successfully implemented transformative transit projects can help guide Nashville as it continues to make progress on *Choose How You Move* implementation.



Quotes are not directly tied to adjoining case studies.

Interviewees: Zach Adamson, City-Council Liaison, Department of Public Works (Indianapolis); Lisa Soard, Director of Communications, IndyGo (Indianapolis); Annette Darrow, Senior Director – Service Planning, IndyGo (Indianapolis); Brooke Thomas, Chief Development Officer, IndyGo (Indianapolis); Cheyenne Conyer, Chief of Staff, CapMetro (Austin); Liane Conte, Chief of Staff, ProjectConnect (Austin); John Bullen, Assistant Executive Director, Maricopa Association of Governments (Phoenix); Markus Coleman, Light Rail Coordinator, City Manager’s Office (Phoenix); Jesús Sapien, Public Transit Director, City Manager’s Office (Phoenix); Alexis Tameron Kinsey, Chief Policy and Government Relations Officer, Valley Metro (Phoenix).



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Written by:

Erin Hafkenschiel, President and Matthew Kenny, Policy Associate

For further information, email us at info@thinktn.org.