

## Orange County Mayor Jerry Demings promises transit funding strategy soon



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**Orange County** Mayor Jerry Demings said he'll soon announce a strategy for mass transit across the county, which could bring needed cash to financially strapped rail and bus systems.

“Sometime within the next four to six weeks we’ll announce a plan and a strategy going forward,” Demings said, speaking Friday after the Orange County Regional Economic Summit. “At that time it is our goal to try to get some type of referendum on the ballot in November 2020 elections. But the mechanics about what we will go after ... I’ll leave that for another day to explain.”

Although Demings didn’t mention SunRail or Lynx by name, his transition team said the newly elected mayor would work toward developing a dedicated funding source for enhanced transit and roads, and also wants to double the number of rides on Lynx, which doesn’t have dedicated financial backing. In 2021, four area counties and Orlando also will be expected to pay for SunRail.

During an earlier discussion with Orlando Mayor **Buddy Dyer**, as well as the chairwomen of Osceola, Lake and Seminole Counties Cheryl Grieb, Leslie Campione and Brenda Carey, talk centered on the need to get a grasp on regionwide transportation to fuel further economic growth.

**“We need to deal with issues like our mass transit system,” Demings said. “It’s going to cost money. I believe ... Orange County is a little bit behind the 8 ball because we don’t have a dedicated funding source.”**

**“I will go ahead and sign up for the dedicated funding source,” Dyer added.**

**In Osceola County, commissioners last month decided to move forward with a ballot referendum scheduled for May to add a penny to the county sales tax. If approved, the added \$60-plus million would be spent on transportation needs.**

**“We know that if we don’t have our transportation, we don’t have economic growth,” Grieb said.**

**If the additional penny is approved, it would take the county’s sales tax to 8.5 cents, the maximum level allowed by the state. Osceola also approved a nickel increase to its gas tax in 2015.**

**The roundtable, moderated by Tim Giuliani, the CEO of the Orlando Economic Partnership, also focused on the organization’s 2030 report, which projected rapid growth across the region, and fast-growing industries led by home and health-care services.**

**By 2030, Giuliani said there will be 500,000 more jobs across all industries, but the group predicts wages won’t significantly increase. With costs expected to continue climbing, affordable housing will be a continued challenge.**

**Currently Orlando is among the worst metros for the availability of affordable housing.**

**The report touts continued population growth across the region — about 30 percent in Orange and Lake counties, while Osceola leads the pack at more than 50 percent — which comes with an extra 600,000 cars on the road, Guiliani said, with the new population coming mostly from immigration.**

**With that, Demings said the need for a robust transportation system will be increased in giving commuters alternative means than highways to get to work.**

**Sean Snaith, a UCF economist, said in the coming years the I-4 corridor will be a key driver to the state’s economy.**

**“Transportation is a key element here,” Snaith said. “We’re not a tiny town here. We’re really on the brink of becoming a very major metropolitan area and we need a major transportation network to facilitate that.”**

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