

A 2019 Madison Mayor Candidate Forum

January 27, 2019



The Madison Area Bus Advocates (MABA) co-sponsored a forum for Madison's 2019 mayor candidates on January 15, 2019. The forum was videotaped by City Channel and can be seen at <https://media.cityofmadison.com/Mediasite/Showcase/madison-city-channel/Presentation/71947066732c485db4aaf511f97bf7561d>.

The candidates were [Mo Cheeks](#), [Satya Rhodes-Conway](#), [Paul Soglin](#), [Raj Shukla](#), [Nick Hart](#) and [Toriana Pettaway](#). The idea was to include the issue of transportation alongside other basic local issues of importance such as economic development, environmental sustainability, housing, criminal justice, racial equity, renewable energy and food access rather than dealing with it in a setting in which its relative importance could not be assessed.

The primary is February 19. The top two candidates will advance to the general election on April 2. MABA does not endorse any candidate but does provide transportation-related information to the voting public. As a co-sponsor it asked:

Madison's mayor oversees a city Department of Transportation responsible for a multi-modal mobility and parking system. How would you expand on our current system and what is your vision for making it more environmentally and economically sustainable, socially just, safer, healthier, and more affordable than it is now? You may wish to give an example or two.

Harald Kliem of [Madison Bikes](#) transcribed answers along with the answers to another transportation question related to bicycle safety. Using that [transcription](#), we focus here on answers to MABA's question.

The first candidate to address the question was **Satya Rhodes-Conway**. She emphasized that she had used the bus ever since she moved to Madison a couple decades ago. She considers transit an important part of a full public transportation system. She thought that our transportation system should be oriented toward people, not cars. Her "top transportation priority would be to bring rapid transit to Madison." She thought it a "critical improvement" in a "climate-friendly" system that would consist of electric vehicles. It would be a regional system rather than limited to the city of Madison.

Rhodes-Conway did not see Madison being able to finance such a system without substantial state and federal participation. The best scenario would be for Madison to be part of a Regional Transit Authority with state-enabled taxing authority (RTA). But until our state legislature would enable such authority, she suggested that Madison could at least build collaborations with the county and neighboring municipalities.

The second candidate to address our question was **Paul Soglin**. Soglin did not mention whether he himself ever rode the bus. But he too thought rapid transit a priority, and that it required state and federal financial participation. He also agreed that we needed to have a Regional Transit Authority with taxing ability. He said that he would work with the Evers administration to set up an RTA that would cover about 75 percent of the population of Dane County. He did not mention collaborating with the county or neighboring municipalities. That is not surprising since his animosity toward County Executive Joe Parisi is no secret.

Soglin said that he envisioned the system becoming totally electric and powered by solar energy, and that MG&E would be a healthy partner in the design. He did not mention of course that aside from the four electric buses that Metro will get next year through a special program, he had just approved [Metro purchasing nothing but all-diesel buses](#) for the next five years. Nor did he mention that MG&E has been [enmeshed long term](#) in the generation of electricity through burning coal.

The third candidate to address our question was **Raj Shukla**. Shukla did not mention whether he himself ever rode the bus. But he did agree with the two previous candidates that Madison needed the state to enable the existence of Regional Transit Authorities with taxing power (RTAs). He said in fact, that his career began in southeastern Wisconsin when having a RTA there was a major issue. There was a coalition of business and political leaders who all wanted it and lobbied for it at the state capitol. Milwaukee voters passed an advisory referendum supporting a tax to better fund transit and parks. But the state legislature had ultimate authority and would not enable RTAs.

Shukla thought his position as the Executive Director of a statewide environmental organization put him in a good position to help form a coalition of officials throughout urban and rural Wisconsin who would lobby for state enablement of Regional Transit Authorities. He wanted Madison to grow equitably in a way that was environmentally responsible.

The fourth candidate to address our question was **Nick Hart**. He did not say that he rode the bus himself or had any idea about the possible finance schemes involved but rather noted that “the most marginalized and underrepresented people are affected most by this.” And in direct conflict with the notion of making public transit more attractive to **everyone** by adding **rapid** transit to the mix, he continued that “we need to improve and expand bus service ... especially the higher-need areas and neighborhoods with people who rely heavily, are more dependent on transportation ...”

The fifth candidate to address our question was **Toriana Pettaway**. She did not say whether she rode the bus. She thought we needed a regional and rapid system and that it would come soon. She thought we needed to have “real” partnerships with neighboring communities and that we also needed state legislative support. She suggested that Madison’s faith communities, not just corporate sponsors, could “start rattling behind mass transit” even now, before Madison received more state assistance.

Pettaway noted that people in transit-dependent communities also often had the longest commutes with “two to three transfers” compared to travelers on University Ave. or Mineral Point who “don’t even have to look at a service schedule.” She wanted the system itself to be more equitable.

The last candidate to address our question was **Mo Cheeks**. He said that he used the bus himself and that it was “the primary way that I get to work.” He also agreed that our transportation system needed to be “people-oriented” and include Bus Rapid Transit. But he wanted more. He wanted a “comprehensive transportation plan” and he wanted better service for 2nd and 3rd shift workers. On the other hand, he did not suggest how he would pay for any of this, how expansion could involve the participation of neighboring municipalities or other levels of government.

Cheeks did *not* say how he voted, as a sitting alder, when Metro requested more money in the budget to fund more service. He did not say that he had proposed additional funding to expand bus service or that he would take the lead in doing so. Rather, he described an event in which he had helped prevent Metro from taking away existing and vital bus service from constituents.

Interestingly, nobody mentioned parking as an important part of our transportation system. Some analysts will argue that the availability of parking is often the biggest factor in whether people drive or use transit. Most of Madison's Tax Incremental Finance (TIF) money (worth millions and millions of dollars) is going toward helping developers finance the construction of parking structures (at an estimated \$40,000 per underground stall). Mo Cheeks himself had recently shepherded a change through the Common Council that [enabled Exact Sciences to receive millions of dollars in TIF money to fund a parking structure.](#)