

All Aboard? Tampa-St. Pete Rail Idea Has Momentum

By RICH SHOPES The Tampa Tribune

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TAMPA - Getting to St. Petersburg could be as easy as a train ride down I-275.

The idea might sound fanciful, but lately it's gaining steam. Planners last month called the downtown-to-downtown route the potential backbone for a transit network in Hillsborough, Pinellas, Pasco and other counties.

A Department of Transportation consultant hired last month will study this idea and others, and it's likely to come up for debate by the Tampa Bay Area Regional Transportation Authority, a new group formed to build major transportation projects.

"In terms of transit connections, I do believe that is the linchpin," said Lucie Ayer, executive director of the Hillsborough County Metropolitan Planning Organization, a group federally mandated to consider long-range plans.

The idea has been considered for years. Politicians floated it during the late 1980s and early '90s when the Howard Frankland Bridge was rebuilt to add a second span 100 feet north of the old one. Workers left room between the spans for a railroad bridge.

Now politicians and planners are wondering if the new bridge can be built and are asking scores of related questions. What kind of train? Where would it stop? What about the Pinellas side where right of way is scarce?

Cost Could Exceed \$1 Billion

The biggest question - how much - seems to be the most elusive of all, given the lack of engineering analysis.

In today's dollars, a three-mile-long, single-track, 15-foot-wide bridge could cost an estimated \$72 million, not including work to bring the tracks onto the Hillsborough and Pinellas causeways, said Dwayne Kile, chief design engineer at the DOT's Tampa office.

Extending the line the rest of the way, downtown to downtown, could cost hundreds of millions more. A billion dollars-plus for the entire stretch - bridge, station stops and right-of-way included - wouldn't be a surprise, says Brian Smith, executive director of the Pinellas MPO.

"This would be the network's biggest challenge because the tracks don't exist yet. It's not like CSX tracks are already there, running north and south," he said. "They would have to be created."

Nevertheless, planners say a Tampa-St. Petersburg route makes sense.

Interstate 275 already connects the two downtowns and traverses major employment centers at West Shore and Pinellas' Gateway. Rail stops likely would occur at those places.

The state already owns land at the former Morgan Street Jail in downtown Tampa and at the old Speedway property in Pinellas to allow for station stops. Plus, I-275 is already motorists' favorite cross-bay route. Daily traffic on the Howard Frankland surpasses combined traffic on the Courtney Campbell and Gandy bridges by 44 percent. Estimates in 2005 pegged the Howard Frankland's daily flow at 130,000 vehicles.

Also important, at least to Hillsborough, the upcoming widening of I-275 will allow for a transit right-of-way from the Howard Frankland to downtown Tampa.

Some of the pieces are falling nicely into place, say officials.

"A good amount of right of way is already there in interstate corridor," says Bob Clifford, the DOT's planning chief in Tampa.

But the picture gets hazy across the bay. Getting there is the first big challenge. Engineers face three options and all involve a new, three-mile bridge:

- They can build a separate rail crossing beside the Howard Frankland, creating a separate causeway at each end. The bridge could resemble the two-mile John T. Collinson Bridge in Pensacola, now the longest railroad bridge in Florida.
- They can retrofit one of the existing spans to accommodate rail, probably the older northbound one, and then build a new bridge for cars.
- Or they can build a railroad span within the 100-foot right-of-way between the north and south bridges. This has been talked about since the 1980s.

For most of the way, Kile says, there's enough room between the spans for the rail bridge, but the north and south bridges come together when they reach the causeways, leaving a median of just 26 feet. That might be so narrow it would require elevating the tracks.

Speed May Be Of Essence

Once the rail line enters Pinellas, the challenges only get trickier.

If engineers keep to the median and run the line at ground level, they'll need to retrofit or replace eight overpasses, including a footbridge, because all of them are supported by pillars in the median.

At other places, the median is too narrow to support a rail line. Then there are grade issues where the highway turns and twists sharply. Those bends might be fine for cars, but trains need more room to turn, particularly commuter trains traveling more than 50 mph.

The trains might need to reach that speed, or close to it, to compete with cars going faster - it's 25 to 45 minutes to downtown St. Petersburg from Tampa, depending on traffic - otherwise people won't take them.

What might happen, said Clifford, is engineers elevate the track in some places and make it at-grade at others, then hopscotch the rail line between the median and outside right of way depending on topography and the availability of right of way.

Clifford won't speculate on costs. He envisions the department playing a role when it comes to funding, along with Pinellas and Hillsborough counties, but the final decision will fall to the newly created Tampa Bay Area Regional Transportation Authority.

The agency has until July 2009 to come up with regional transportation plan and funding strategy. Its first meeting is Aug. 24.

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