

County asked to borrow for roads

A task force wants an extra \$500-million spent on transit needs over five years.

By MIKE BRASSFIELD
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TAMPA - A roads-vs.-rail debate is simmering in Hillsborough County, with at least a half-billion dollars at stake.

A task force led by County Commissioner Ken Hagan is to vote today on a plan asking the county to spend an extra \$500-million on transportation over the next five years, mostly to widen roads and improve intersections.

That's an unprecedented amount. The county would borrow the money and pay off the debt over 20 years.

A handful of critics argue that this is short-sighted. They suggest spending the \$500-million on a light rail network instead. They say that could attract at least \$1.5-billion in state and federal matching money, and would have more impact over the long run.

But members of the transportation task force say that's not realistic; rail is many years away, and the county has to take action to unclog its traffic congestion now. Also, they plan to look at mass transit later this year.

"Everyone realizes that rail is a long-term plan - we're talking 8, 9, 10 years or longer," Hagan said. "We're focusing on bringing immediate relief to our residents."

The County Commission will consider the task force's spending plan in July. This is happening as the county faces a budget crunch because of likely cuts in property taxes.

But the task force was created in the first place because there's widespread agreement that Hillsborough's roads are woefully inadequate.

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The group's 21 members include elected officials, business people and transportation experts. They've sifted through piles of documents including a backlog of road projects that have been on the county's "to do" list for years. Several of those roads are classified as "failed" - overloaded with cars beyond their capacity.

Hagan warned that any plan calling for a big tax increase was likely to get a chilly reception from county commissioners.

So the group proposes borrowing \$500-million, above and beyond the \$50-million to \$85-million a year that the county already will be spending on transportation.

Here's how the money would be spent:

-\$250-million to widen or extend 19 roads all over the county. See box.

-\$160-million to improve or construct more than 50 intersections.

-\$40-million for the county's first "bus rapid transit" route on Fletcher Avenue - frequent, fast buses that make fewer stops.

-\$30-million to start buying rights-of-way for light rail.

-\$20-million for new traffic lights and a high-tech system that monitors traffic and adjusts signals accordingly.

The plan has its critics.

Former county commissioner Ed Turanchik, a longtime proponent of rail, e-mailed every current commissioner to warn that the county is squandering a major opportunity.

The \$500-million could attract up to \$1.5-billion in state and federal dollars if it was invested in a rail network, Turanchik said. The county should at least wait to see what a newly created regional transportation authority will do, he said.

"The best thing to do is not waste it on incremental improvements that will get eaten up in a sea of congestion and growth," he said.

Members of organizations such as the Sierra Club and Hillsborough Advocates for Improved Transit are voicing similar concerns.

Their objections prompted responses from task force members Bob Abberger and Steve Polzin, who have long been involved in local transportation issues.

Abberger, an executive with the Trammell Crow construction company, says the county has no choice but to fix its congested roads first. And Polzin doubts that a Hillsborough rail network would really get that much federal and state money.

"We can throw \$500-million at transit, and we will still see our community grind to total gridlock with a virtual moratorium on new jobs as we find ourselves with no roadway capacity," Abberger said.

Hagan had the task force look at short-term fixes first, to be followed by a push this fall to examine long-term solutions such as more mass transit.

And how to pay for that? "We will discuss any and all funding options," Hagan said.

The argument for light rail is that the region's population will keep growing even as it becomes harder to make roads any wider. But it's an expensive investment.

"We have deficient roads right now. The payback of a transit system is going to come over decades," said County Commissioner Mark Sharpe, a member of the task force. "We're going to have to see how we're going to pay for it."

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Fast Facts:

Road widenings and extensions

The task force may propose spending nearly \$250-million to pay for these road projects. That would finish most of them, though a few would be designed but not completed.

North county

- Citrus Park extension to Sheldon Road
- Lutz-Lake Fern Road from Dale Mabry Highway to Suncoast Parkway
- Linebaugh Avenue and Race Track Road to Countryway
- Van Dyke Road-Tobacco Road to Dale Mabry
- Old Memorial Highway from Hillsborough Avenue to Montague Street
- Fletcher Avenue from I-275 to I-75

East and south county

- U.S. 301-Balm Road to State Road 674
- Lithia-Pinecrest Road from State Road 60 to Bloomingdale Avenue
- Gornto Lake Road extension to SR 60
- County Road 579 from I-4 to Sligh Avenue
- Parsons from SR 60 to Oakfield Drive

City of Tampa

- Cross Creek Boulevard from Cory Lake Boulevard to Morris Bridge Road
- New Tampa Boulevard bridge at I-75
- Parts of 40th Street

Temple Terrace

- Telecom Parkway extension to Morris Bridge Road
- Arbor Island extension to Telecom Parkway

Plant City

- Trapnell Road extension

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