

Don't rush move to regional transit

By A TIMES EDITORIAL

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Pinellas and Hillsborough counties have worked methodically the past year to plant the seeds for a regional transportation system. A wish list that officials from throughout Tampa Bay sketched out Friday shows mass transit, including rail, needs to play a big part, which will require funding beyond what local governments separately spend on buses and roads. But officials need to have a solid plan before asking voters to raise taxes. The public is in the mood to reduce spending, and a defeat at the polls could set back regional cooperation a decade.

The chairman of Hillsborough's bus agency, HART, proposed last week to put a half-cent sales tax on the January ballot. The move would eliminate property tax funding for HART, while more than doubling annual revenue, to \$110--million, and enabling the agency to expand bus service and build commuter rail. Officials at the regional summit conceded again Friday that any rail system would likely require a dedicated sales tax. The problem with HART's proposal is timing. It has no plan on the table, no political support and no vision for integrating Hillsborough's network into a larger, regional system.

HART's board will consider in August whether to move ahead with a referendum. It should instead work with Pinellas County Commissioner Ronnie Duncan, who has led the regional dialogue, and Tampa Mayor Pam Iorio, who has made mass transit the priority for her second term. Duncan, Iorio and others are laying the essential groundwork - drawing rail routes between St. Petersburg and Tampa and exploring how to expand intercity and local bus service. Officials also are looking at how to better use growth-management laws to deal with congestion and sprawl. The issue is not merely how to move people, but how to develop cities. These deliberative steps will build a broader, better transportation package than one parochial and cobbled together in a matter of months.

It is not even clear whether HART will or should have a role in managing a regional system. The regional transportation authority created by lawmakers this year is a better framework for planning and overseeing an integrated, area-wide transportation network. The agency has two years to write a master plan. That gives the major counties and cities along the Gulf Coast time to run the numbers, nail down any federal or state subsidies and produce a plan to take to the voters. Two years also provides time to address major political considerations. Several jurisdictions, for example, might want to hold a tax referendum in 2010. Some might want to rewrite their growth management laws to better prepare for a regional mass transportation system. These discussions are related, and they take time. By stepping back, HART could help the region put the strongest possible plan forward.

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