

## Get moving on Florida mass transit

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Mass transit should be a top priority right now for Florida and its major cities. Gas prices are soaring. Road congestion threatens the environment and growth. Cash-strapped governments are looking to stem the bleeding from serving the ever-outward suburbs. Mass transit is attractive because it makes financial sense. So why is Florida moving in the opposite direction?

It's as if policymakers from Tallahassee on down cannot connect the economic dots. Gas is nearing \$4 a gallon. Nothing that affects the price — refining capacity, demand for energy in China and India, the stability of oil-producing states — seems destined to drive down consumer costs. Oil prices set new records almost daily. Yet against this backdrop, the state and local communities are navel-gazing or outright undermining the footing for transit.

Yet again this year, state legislators failed to dedicate a funding stream to Tri-Rail, the commuter line in South Florida. Never mind that the line between Palm Beach and Miami-Dade counties continues to break ridership records. Its 352,000 passengers last month was a gain from March and nearly a one-third jump from a year ago. Closer to home, ridership is up 10 percent this year for the Pinellas transit system and 7.4 percent for Hillsborough, which move a combined 23-million passengers annually. Yet Tri-Rail faces crippling cuts this year if the three counties that fund it, which includes Broward, choose to cut back on contributions that are matched by the state. Faced with rising fuel costs and cuts in property tax collections, the Pinellas and Hillsborough bus systems are considering cutting back service, too. This is the wrong direction in a state with a service economy where a household can spend a quarter or more of its income on transportation.

Tampa Mayor Pam Iorio put the costs of the car culture in stark terms this week, announcing that the much-anticipated east-west expressway in New Tampa was likely doomed because of its cost. Killing it would be the right decision. The road, at a planned cost of \$155-million, is too expensive. But that doesn't solve the problem of easing congestion in New Tampa; it merely shows that the reliance on roads alone is unsustainable.

The new Tampa Bay-area transit planning agency, or TBARTA, will need to chart a role for commuter rail and expanded bus transit. It should be buoyed by a new report that shows home values holding up best in the bay area's urban cores, which are dense enough to make rail an option. But as the Tri-Rail experience shows, making sense is not the problem — commuters are coming around. Changing the mind-set of policymakers is the challenge. The sooner we do it, the better for Florida.

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