



Group Premieres Regional Transit Proposal

By RICH SHOPES, The Tampa Tribune

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TAMPA - The county's long-range planning group, the Hillsborough's Metropolitan Planning Organization, unveiled a plan Monday to have trains rumbling from St. Petersburg to Tampa and Lakeland.

It also has rail lines to South Tampa and Wesley Chapel, as well as an elaborate bus network crisscrossing the county.

Trains and buses also would stretch to the University of South Florida, Brandon and Bradenton. The main corridor is between Tampa, USF and the airport, or the West Shore area. Transit hubs would serve as connection points to rail and bus lines.

Dubbed the Transit Concept for 2050, the plan would handle the region's transit needs in 2050. It comes after a year of study and town hall meetings.

The next step is to present the plan to the organization's board for discussion. That will happen in October. Then it will be presented to the board for final approval in November.

The proposal is not set in stone and is not binding on local governments. Any portion can be used or rejected by the county, city, Hillsborough Area Regional Transit, or by the regional transportation authority, which is developing a master transportation plan.

Tampa Mayor Pam Iorio urged Tampa and neighboring communities to rally around transit as a way to solve congestion and suburban sprawl.

'If we don't do it, then the population of the county will spread out from corner to corner,' said Lucie Ayer, the planning organization's executive director.

The organization's plan drew at least one fan to the unveiling Monday at Channelside Cinemas.

Patricia Kemp, of Seminole Heights, a mother of two teenagers, said she liked that it touches the major destinations - the airport, USF and downtown Tampa and St. Petersburg.

'More and more you get caught up in this traffic,' she said. 'I have two teenagers and I'm worried about them driving. I'd love to see them taking transit.'

Three days earlier, a regional transportation authority adopted a framework for transit. That plan also has trains running from St. Petersburg to Tampa and Lakeland.

The fact that so many rail plans are coming forward at once wasn't lost on the crowd.

'We have plenty of plans,' Iorio said. 'We've got to roll up our sleeves and get to the nitty-gritty.'

She's been pushing for a transit system for more than a year and is a member of the Tampa Bay Area Regional Transportation Authority.

She welcomed the plan as a way to talk about transit's overall importance. 'Rail needs forward-thinking land-use patterns that increase density,' she said.

Both plans, meanwhile, lack funding - although officials maintain that funding talks are around the corner and will gather steam when a transit plan moves toward approval.

Unlike the authority's plan, which is regional in scope, the MPO plan focuses on Tampa and Hillsborough County.

In addition to the St. Petersburg-Tampa-Lakeland rail connection, it includes a Tampa-to-Bradenton rail link.

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