

## Hillsborough to run 'flex' buses like taxis

**Within 90 days, some areas will have door-to-door service in public transportation.**

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TAMPA - Coming soon to Hillsborough County's suburbs: cheap, door-to-door bus service.

The Hillsborough Area Regional Transit board voted Monday to start a new "flex" bus service in Brandon, Carrollwood, Seffner, Temple Terrace and Town 'N Country.

Minibuses will circulate around "flex routes" of 4 to 7 square miles. People in those areas will be able to call ahead and get picked up, for the same price of a regular bus trip - \$1.50, or 75 cents for seniors.

The service is to start within 90 days.

The program, modeled after similar services in Jacksonville and elsewhere, has 30 months of initial funding.

It's one of a series of moves by the bus agency - at the urging of Hillsborough County commissioners - to become more relevant in the suburbs.

HART envisions suburban riders using the flex buses to get to work, and to malls, grocery stores, doctors' offices and other bus stops.

Riders must call at least two hours ahead and give their address and destination. A rider who goes shopping could arrange with the driver to meet outside the store afterward.

"It's to help people move around within their community," said agency spokeswoman Jill Cappadoro. "Because we're using smaller vehicles, we'll be able to maneuver into neighborhoods, apartment complexes, gated communities."

HART bought nine minibuses for \$85,000 each and will employ 20 new drivers. Over the first 30 months, the program is to cost \$3.7-million, paid from federal and county grants.

The agency expects perhaps 60,000 passengers in the first year, or two per bus per hour of service.

HART's board bickered over whether the flex routes are a political move to appease county officials. It also decided - over the objections of the local bus drivers union - to privatize the service instead of hiring more union drivers, saving an estimated \$700,000.

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