

[Click to Print](#)[EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

## Iorio Wants Tampa's Train Plans To Move Forward

By RICH SHOPES

The Tampa Tribune

Published: July 31, 2008

Updated: 12:22 am

TAMPA - Rather than wait for a regional transportation authority to develop a plan, Mayor Pam Iorio wants to develop a Tampa-centric approach that would ask Hillsborough County voters in 2010 whether to fund mass transit with a sales tax.

As previously proposed, the system would involve trains running from New Tampa to Tampa International Airport with stops at the University of South Florida and downtown. A final leg would take it north from the airport to Linebaugh Avenue.

"I think the city is ready," she said this week. "I think the people are ready."

Some members of that regional authority, the Tampa Bay Area Regional Transportation Authority, or TBARTA, think Iorio is jumping the gun.

"We need the support of multiple counties to make this work," Clearwater mayor and TBARTA board member Frank Hibbard said.

Hibbard said Iorio should wait until TBARTA finishes its analysis in December or January, at which point board members can decide where to start a mass transit system. Hibbard backs a St. Petersburg-to-Tampa route with a stop at Tampa International Airport.

Pinellas County Commissioner Ronnie Duncan, another TBARTA member, also wants Iorio to slow down.

"It bothers me that we're so close to having a regional plan and a financing program that I think we should wait," he said. "But I understand her passion, and I can't fault her for that."

Iorio also sits on the TBARTA board and said most regional rail systems get their starts as one or two lines in a city.

TBARTA, she said, eventually could add to the existing Tampa system as it grows, bringing mass transit to the entire seven-county region the group represents: Hillsborough, Pinellas, Pasco, Hernando, Citrus, Manatee and Sarasota counties.

"My hope is that this would be part of TBARTA's strategic plan," she said.

The amount of any proposed sales tax assessment - whether a fraction of a penny or a whole penny - has yet to be decided.

lorio's plan is based on one that the county's bus agency, Hillsborough Area Regional Transit, or HART, created years ago and recently dusted off for revisions.

HART plans to vote Monday to pursue that scenario. Like lorio, the agency is eager to get the question on the 2010 ballot. If the plan is approved, HART would seek millions in federal funding for construction.

A new rail system isn't the agency's only aim. HART faces growing demand from riders, but its main funding source, property taxes, is shrinking. Sixty-five percent of its \$55 million operating budget comes from property taxes.

Raising the 7-cent sales tax by as much as a half-cent would generate an estimated \$110 million yearly for transit in Hillsborough.

"We're talking not just about rail, but funding over the next 20 years for our bus system network, funding for bus rapid transit and what it would take to complete the streetcar system downtown," HART executive director David Armijo said. "There's a multitude of projects in Hillsborough."

TBARTA was formed by the Legislature in May 2007 with the sole purpose of creating a regional transportation plan with help from the state Department of Transportation.

Just months ago, the governor approved \$2 million in state funding for TBARTA to hire a staff. By statute, the agency must have a plan in place by July 2009, but it's working to finish it by the end of this year.

Board members hope that plan sheds light on where to start building a rail system.

That's not soon enough for lorio, who said it's unclear whether TBARTA will one day operate as a transit agency with taxing authority. Under its current structure, TBARTA does not have the authority to levy taxes.

HART's rail plan failed several years ago after Hillsborough County commissioners refused to bring it to the ballot. The sooner HART gets the question on the ballot this time around the better its chances to attract federal money distributed partly on a first-come, first-served basis, officials said.

Ray Chiaramonte, interim director of the county's long-term planning agency, said HART might have a better chance this time around.

"I think we are living in a totally different universe than we were living in then," Chiaramonte said. "Back then, gas prices weren't \$3 and \$4 a gallon."

St. Petersburg City Councilman Jeff Danner said it might make sense for Hillsborough to create its own plan if it's ahead of the other counties.

"It's an idea worth considering," he said.

If backed by its board, HART will work with county planners to update Tampa's plan. The finished plan would be presented to county commissioners next summer. If approved by commissioners, a sale tax option would be put on the ballot in 2010.

"This depends on the county commission," lorio said. "If they are willing to put it on the ballot, this

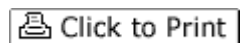
can still come to fruition, even though we're 20 years behind.

"Every other city that did this in the '80s and '90s is now reaping the benefit of their decisions and have an alternative to cars."

Reporter Rich Shopes can be reached at (813) 259-7633 or at [rshopes@tampatrib.com](mailto:rshopes@tampatrib.com).

**Find this article at:**

<http://www2.tbo.com/content/2008/jul/31/na-iorioitstraintimefortampa>



[EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

©2008 Media General Inc. All Rights Reserved.

[Member agreement](#) and [privacy statement](#)