



Long-Range Transit Plan Debuts As Transportation Tops Agendas

By RICH SHOPEs The Tampa Tribune

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TAMPA - Hillsborough County planners this week are unveiling a long-range transit plan for a network of trains, buses and transit hubs for passengers to make connections.

The plan, like others in recent years, has trains and buses shuttling from downtown to the West Shore Boulevard business district and to the University of South Florida. Regional trains would take travelers farther, linking Tampa, St. Petersburg, Orlando and Bradenton.

A presentation was made Monday to local officials and members of Hillsborough's Metropolitan Planning Organization, which developed the plan during the past year and organized town meetings to get public input.

The presentation is one of three by the MPO scheduled for this week. A public unveiling is set for 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday in the lobby at the Museum of Science & Industry, 4801 E. Fowler Ave.

"I thought it was excellent and a good starting point," Tampa transit manager Elaine McCloud said of the 90-minute presentation.

Transit is the focus of several meetings this week. In addition to the MPO presentations, local officials and legislators are set to talk today at an annual forum about regional transportation. On Friday, the Tampa Bay Area Regional Transportation Authority will meet for the first time as part of its effort to create a regional transit plan by July 2009.

The MPO's plan likely will be debated by officials in coming months. It could come up this fall when members of Hillsborough's transportation task force meet, said Rich Reidy, a legislative aide to Hillsborough Commissioner Ken Hagan. The task force also is trying to come up with a transit plan.

"It seems to me that anything to be presented here or any major plan is going to be part of the discussion by the task force," said Reidy, who also heard the MPO presentation.

He questioned whether a north-south commuter train should be closer to Interstate 75 rather than U.S. 41 and coastal communities prone to flooding in major storms. He also asked whether it makes sense to elevate the trains in congested areas to avoid road crossings, an issue not addressed by the MPO.

"My job is to ask questions and brief the commissioner," he said.

Also unknown is whether CSX Transportation will allow the use of its tracks, and the system's cost.

MPO Executive Director Lucie Ayer said the study wasn't intended to address all of the right of way, engineering and condemnation questions associated with a detailed rail plan. The MPO plan is more of an overview.

"Right now we just look at it from a system perspective," she said. "We are not at the stage where we can answer those engineering questions. That will be part of the process later on."

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