

New rail line plan revealed; next stop, board vote

The passenger system would link Pasco to downtown Tampa, the airport and USF.

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TAMPA - Insisting it's not "pie in the sky," Mayor Pam Iorio and Hillsborough transportation officials unveiled an updated plan for a regional passenger rail network Monday.

Rail lines would link downtown Tampa with West Shore, Tampa International Airport and the University of South Florida. They would stretch through Hillsborough County and into the growing suburbs of central Pasco. The plan envisions rail lines from Tampa to Pasco along U.S. 41 and eventually Bruce B. Downs Boulevard,

"I feel it's within our grasp. I think the community is ready for transit," Iorio said before a crowd of about 60 at Channelside Cinemas.

To offer a practical alternative to cars, rail lines would have to be linked to a network of buses and people-moving circulator systems, she said.

"If it does not pass the common sense test, we should not build it," the mayor said. "This is a very practical community."

A decision to build would not come anytime soon. The major hurdle will be finding enough taxpayer money to make it happen. Its supporters will be working to rally the public around the plan, which does not yet have a price tag.

City and county elected officials who are on Hillsborough's transportation board, the Metropolitan Planning Organization, are to vote in November whether to add it to Hillsborough's long-range transportation plan.

Alan Steinbeck, the planning organization's project manager for the rail plan, said it envisions a mix of light rail, commuter rail and buses. Light rail cars, powered by overhead electrical lines, make frequent stops and typically serve one city and nearby suburbs. Heavier commuter rail is locomotives pulling passenger cars; it generally runs on existing railroad tracks, making fewer stops over longer distances.

"We acknowledge that it is very ambitious," said planning organization executive director Lucie Ayer. But she said a rail system would be needed to take pressure off ever-more-crowded highways. Hillsborough's population of roughly 1-million is expected to double in 40 years, and the road system won't be equipped to handle that, she said.

Without mass transit, she said, future Tampa Bay residents will simply spread out more and drive increasingly longer distances to work.

Transportation planners spent a year on the proposal, dusting off old rail plans and getting input from the public at numerous forums.

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