



House OKs Transit Authority; Next Step Is Crist's Signature

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TALLAHASSEE - A plan to create a regional mass transit authority in the Tampa Bay area is on its way to the governor.

The bill, approved by the House and Senate, forms the Tampa Bay Area Regional Transportation Authority.

Plans for the authority, which would represent seven counties - Citrus, Hernando, Hillsborough, Manatee, Pasco, Pinellas and Sarasota - could include light rail, an express bus system and new toll roads.

"It's a tremendous victory in the Tampa Bay area," said Sen. Mike Fasano, R-New Port Richey, who made the bill his top priority this legislative session. "It'll have a huge impact in addressing our transportation needs."

The House approved the bill by a 117-0 vote Wednesday, and the Senate approved it last week. The proposal awaits Gov. Charlie Crist's signature.

Rep. Bill Galvano, R-Bradenton, said the authority gives the seven counties the ability to build - not just plan - projects and transit systems on a regional scale and seek federal and state dollars.

The authority cannot levy taxes, but it can acquire property through eminent domain and sell revenue bonds to pay for toll roads. It can create and operate a mass transit system, establish a fare structure, and enter into partnerships with private companies to create transit hubs and park-and-ride facilities.

Galvano said the authority might start work by the end of the year; it has until July 2009 to develop a master transportation plan. Its 16-member board must meet within 60 days of the legislation's approval by the governor.

While developing the plan, the authority must hold public hearings in the seven counties.

Funding remains the big question. Some money might come from the state Department of Transportation, the federal government and public-private partnerships. The bill also creates a mechanism for selling revenue bonds to build toll roads.

To get it started, the state will provide \$1 million this year to pay for office space and staff members, including an executive director, planners, engineers and lawyers.

Legislation Results From Hard Work

The legislation's passage culminates a yearlong push by Galvano and a three-year effort by the Tampa Bay Partnership, an economic development group, to address regional transportation needs.

"We've become, unfortunately, addicted to roadways, and it's ruining our quality of life," Galvano said. "We're backed up on our roadways, and we're choking on plans."

By not having a regional transit system, growth has been hampered and some businesses have been discouraged from moving to the Bay area, said Joe Smith, chairman of the partnership's transportation committee.

"We're the last urban center in the U.S. that doesn't have a transit system. We have people who can't get to work because they can't afford \$10,000 a year for the cost of a vehicle," Smith said. "This was a significant step today, but it's really the first step in a much larger process."

The partnership teamed up with Galvano 15 months ago. Scores of transportation plans have emerged over the years.

Hillsborough Area Regional Transit proposed a \$900 million light-rail system, but that was shelved four years ago. Likewise, a \$1.5 billion monorail for Pinellas County died last year.

The problem, Smith said, is that the Bay area doesn't have an agency with enough clout to carry out large-scale transit plans. It also lacks the muscle to supersede local jurisdictional squabbles.

The authority was created to overcome both of those hurdles, he said.

Iorio Stresses Need For Mass Transit

Tampa Mayor Pam Iorio is hoping one aim of the authority is to create a rail system for Tampa and Hillsborough, Pinellas

and Pasco counties.

"At this point, the needs of Manatee and Pasco might be vastly different than the needs of Pinellas and Hillsborough. But because of this regional authority, we will be able to take a large, long-term approach and bring everybody to the table.

"The population in some cities might not be at the level where they need mass transit now, but it will be at that level someday," Iorio said.

The authority will have 15 voting members, including the mayors or designees of St. Petersburg, Tampa, Sarasota and Bradenton, and commissioners from Hillsborough, Pasco, Pinellas, Citrus, Hernando, Manatee and Sarasota counties. An additional four members will be appointed by the governor.

A 16-member citizen advisory committee, which does not have voting rights, also will be formed.

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