



## Plan Funds Transit Authority

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The Tampa Tribune

Published: April 15, 2008

TAMPA - The transportation authority responsible for creating a mass transit plan for the Tampa Bay area is so cash poor it can't hire an executive director.

Known as TBARTA -- an acronym for Tampa Bay Area Regional Transportation Authority -- the authority doesn't have money to lease office space, pay an administrative assistant or hire even one transportation engineer.

But the funding situation would change dramatically under a bill sponsored by Rep. Bill Galvano, R-Bradenton. His legislation would take millions of dollars from rental car surcharges now going to the Department of Transportation and divert the funds to regional transportation authorities such as TBARTA.

The authority represents Citrus, Hernando, Hillsborough, Manatee, Pasco, Pinellas and Sarasota counties, and offers one of the best chances to unite the region behind a single mass transit plan.

Galvano's bill, which would take 80 percent of the surcharges and give them to the state's transportation authorities, could bring \$17 million to TBARTA in the first year. In addition, the surcharge could be used to secure \$200 million worth of long-term bonds and help the authority qualify for matching federal dollars.

That windfall for TBARTA would come at a price for the Department of Transportation, which would lose millions of dollars earmarked for road projects in Hillsborough and Pinellas counties and elsewhere across the region.

Because of that, the legislation has sparked a tug of war between transportation authorities and the DOT, which says the revenue loss would cause delays for vital road projects.

Losing out on the money would leave TBARTA in a difficult spot.

"It may mean that TBARTA languishes," Galvano said.

The authority straddles two DOT jurisdictions, Districts 7 and 1. District 7 includes Hillsborough, Pinellas, Hernando, Pasco and Citrus counties. Of the \$17 million in surcharge revenues TBARTA would get, about \$15 million would come from those Bay area counties.

Don Skelton, secretary of the DOT's District 7, said he hasn't identified which road projects would be delayed but said the loss to the district could climb to \$100 million over five years, or 2.3 percent of

its \$4.3 billion, five-year budget.

"That may seem like a small amount, but when you look at everything we have to do to maintain and operate our systems, bridge maintenance, the projects coming on line ... it adds up," he said.

### House Outlook Better Than Senate

So far, the bill's chances look good in the House. It sailed through two committees and awaits action in another before moving to the floor for a final vote.

In the Senate, the bill's future is murkier. It hasn't been taken up by any committees, an ominous sign with the session ending in three weeks.

Transportation agencies across the state are lobbying for the bill. The South Florida Regional Transportation Authority, which operates Tri-Rail in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties, last week implored its 15,000 daily Tri-Rail users to send letters to senators.

Sen. Steven Geller, D-Hallandale Beach, the bill's sponsor in the Senate, said passage of the legislation would ensure \$42 million to Tri-Rail and halt a possible reduction in service from 50 trains daily to 20.

The Tampa City Council passed a resolution last week backing the bills. A week earlier, the Tampa Bay Partnership sent e-mails to 350 business members to urge them to contact Sen. Carey Baker, R-Eustis, chairman of the Senate's Transportation Committee.

"Without long-term funding, you just won't be successful," said Ron Pierce, director of the partnership's government relations and community affairs committee. "Our priority is to come up with a funding source."

Approved in June by Gov. Charlie Crist, TBARTA was formed not only to create a transportation plan - incorporating roads, trains and buses - but to carry it out.

But Crist vetoed a companion bill that would have paid for an office, executive director, administrative assistant and legal advice. The governor asked local agencies, not the state, to foot those bills.

### Agency Tries To Find Cash

TBARTA has scrambled for cash ever since. The region's five metropolitan planning organizations have pledged \$5,000 each and the Tampa Bay Partnership, a local business group, chipped in \$50,000.

Some local officials are proposing a compromise about where the rental surcharges should go.

Tampa Mayor Pam Iorio, who sits on TBARTA's board, said the authority could help the DOT and still benefit by drawing down surcharge revenue as needed and returning the rest to the DOT.

In the first year, for example, the authority might use only \$1 million of the \$17 million.

"I would take a very conservative fiscal approach and use only those funds that we really need," she said. "This money traditionally goes to the DOT's work program, which is chronically underfunded, and so we have to be very careful with how we use that money."

Galvano suggested the surcharges be used differently. The revenue could pay back bondholders, enabling the authority to issue as much as \$200 million worth of bonds. Then the money could be cobbled together with a matching federal grant, he said.

TBARTA's board hasn't decided how it would use the surcharge fees.

Pinellas County Commissioner Ronnie Duncan, a

TBARTA member, said he supports an "as-needed" approach like Iorio's but said that at some point TBARTA might need to use more of the surcharge revenues for transportation programs.

"For now, I think it would be far easier to sell if we had a five-year phase-in," he said. "The DOT's five-year work program wouldn't be immediately hit."

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