

Plan fuels transit dreams

A regional transit authority would have the muscle to push a light rail network, but not the money.

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Florida lawmakers are on the cusp of creating a new transportation authority that could build a network of toll roads, rail lines and express buses to get people around seven counties in the Tampa Bay area.

The regional agency would have unusual powers.

Aside from building roads and mass transit, it would operate as a superpowered real estate developer. It could override local zoning rules, take property by eminent domain and partner with companies to build housing and retail clusters around new rail stations.

The idea is to generate money to help build the billion-dollar dream of some of the agency's backers: a light rail network through Pinellas, Pasco and Hillsborough counties.

But no one knows where the rest of the money would come from, leading some to wonder if the regional authority is really just another toll road agency in disguise.

The lawmakers and business leaders who are pushing for the new agency say it's the Tampa Bay area's best bet to get rail, though they acknowledge no one knows exactly how that would be accomplished.

"My sole goal is to create an environment for possibilities," said Rep. Bill Galvano, R-Bradenton, sponsor of the House bill that would create the authority.

Roads and rail

The agency would probably go by the unwieldy name of TBARTA, the Tampa Bay Area Regional Transportation Authority. It would include Citrus, Hernando, Hillsborough, Manatee, Pasco, Pinellas and Sarasota counties.

County commissioners, big-city mayors and business executives would control its board. Beginning July 1, they would have two years to decide on a master plan.

Two state lawmakers - Galvano and Sen. Mike Fasano, R-New Port Richey - have steered identical bills through the House and Senate to create the authority.

Both bills have passed through several committees and are awaiting floor votes and the governor's signature.

Fasano has earmarked \$1-million in the Senate budget for the authority's startup costs. The House bill has no money set aside.

Galvano says the fix isn't in for any particular transportation plan, but he says the authority could tackle:

- Commuter ferries across Tampa Bay.
- A controversial beltway the Tampa-Hillsborough Expressway Authority proposed last year, then backed away from, saying the plan was outside its Hillsborough scope. As proposed, the \$3.5-billion, 70-mile toll road would stretch across north Manatee, east Hillsborough, south Pasco and north Pinellas counties.
- Future Corridors, a series of possible toll roads across rural Florida that the state is considering. One road, a top state priority, could head northeast from Tampa to Jacksonville. Another might stretch from Brooksville down through east Hillsborough or west Polk County, toward Port Charlotte.
- Light rail. This component would be the most complicated. The problem, as always, will be money.

How to pay for it?

There are always debates about whether rail is worth the cost. Hillsborough shelved a \$986-million rail line in 2003. Pinellas killed a \$1.5-billion monorail last year.

Still, the area's leaders are staring down the barrel of a future where the region's population may double in 40 years and it will become much harder, if not impossible, to make roads any wider.

Rail requires taxes. Orlando is building a commuter rail network with tax money: 25 percent local, 25 percent state and 50 percent federal. Cities that want rail have to pony up local money to compete for federal matching funds.

But the Tampa Bay regional authority wouldn't have the power to levy taxes.

Governments and private companies could chip in to pay for projects, but the only way the authority could raise money itself would be to sell revenue bonds, to be paid off by tolls and fares.

The catch: Revenue bonds are used for projects that make investors money, like toll roads. They're not used for projects that lose money, such as taxpayer-subsidized rail or bus lines.

So skeptics doubt the authority would really be able to pay for a mass transit network.

"What you have here is a toll road authority, and nothing else," said former Hillsborough County Commissioner Ed Turanchik, who chaired the defunct Tampa Bay Commuter Rail Authority.

The authority's backers disagree. They insist TBARTA's focus will be on mass transit.

Joe Smith of the Tampa Bay Partnership, a regional business group that's backing the new agency, is looking to state government to funnel more money into transit.

"The state's where the money is," he said.

Galvano says the authority's success will largely depend on partnering with businesses. A company interested in the development opportunities surrounding a rail line might invest in the project itself and share profits from concessions at hubs. "It would be more of a collaborative effort," he said.

But it would be unprecedented for private investment to pay for a rail line by itself. Local money for rail typically comes from sales taxes.

Pinellas and Hillsborough county commissioners have the ability to put a referendum on the ballot for a transit sales tax, but they never have.

Tampa Mayor Pam Iorio wants a referendum in Hillsborough once a new plan for rail is in place, but county commissioners have shown little support for it.

In any case, TBARTA's backers say the new agency could be a magnet for federal cash. And Galvano and Iorio think the federal government would be more likely to sweep dollars toward the new authority once the area shows a commitment to regional planning.

'A lot of power'

The authority could build - or have private companies build - dense developments within a half-mile of rail stations.

Initially, those developments weren't going to have to comply with local zoning or land use regulations. Now they'll have to, thanks to a rewrite of the bill. The authority's transportation projects - roads and rail - still won't have to comply, though they would be encouraged to obey to the "maximum extent feasible."

"It is a lot of power," Galvano acknowledged, especially since the proposed rail lines would run through the middle of St. Petersburg, Clearwater and Tampa.

Some officials think that could cause major clashes later if local governments can't regulate the authority's projects. "Land use decisions are the purview of city councils and county commissions," Iorio said.

Yet there's been little opposition from cities or counties. After state lawmakers sparred over whether the authority should have this power, Galvano amended the bill, granting local communities more say-so in regional projects through public hearings and a mandatory dispute-resolution process.

But if the authority wants a project and one county doesn't, short of court action, the regional plan wins.

The changes to the bill have won over several opponents. A few weeks ago, Lutz activist Denise Layne was the bill's fiercest critic. Now her concerns have mostly been addressed.

But she says she'll keep watching.

"Is there a potential for abuse? ... Always," she said.

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Who would control the authority?

A 15-member board:

- Seven elected officials, one from each county.
- Two mayors or mayoral designees from St. Petersburg and Tampa.
- A third mayor's seat, to flip between Bradenton and Sarasota every two years.
- An appointee from the West Central Florida Metropolitan Planning Organization, made up of local counties' transportation planning agencies.
- And four governor's appointees from the business sector.-The state Department of Transportation would name two nonvoting members.
- The staff could include an executive director, legal counsel, engineers and financial officers.

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