



Polk Says No To Bay Transit Authority

By **BILLY TOWNSEND** The Tampa Tribune

Published: Mar 22, 2007

BARTOW - Joining the Tampa Bay Regional Transportation Authority is too risky. The Heartland Parkway is a great idea. State Sen. J.D. Alexander, R-Lake Wales, has gotten a bad rap for his maneuvering on both.

That's the message from Polk County commissioners, who voted 4-0 Wednesday to decline membership in the proposed authority. Commissioners didn't rule out joining, however, as the authority's role becomes clearer.

Controversy flared this month when Alexander successfully worked to keep Polk out of legislation that would create the Bay area transportation authority. In doing so, he was working against members of his own delegation, including fellow Sen. Paula Dockery, R-Lakeland.

The debate also sparked questions - still unanswered - about which region Polk belongs to: the Bay area, Orlando, the southern heartland or a place all its own.

In trying to include Polk, Dockery was honoring the request of Polk's Transportation Planning Organization, which includes Polk County commissioners.

The TPO voted in February to send a letter to the Polk delegation saying the county wanted in on the authority.

There was a caveat: The TPO wanted to join only if the authority focused on regional mass transit, not roads.

Authority backers in February told TPO board members the authority's focus would be mass transit.

Bills before the Legislature, though, say otherwise.

That was the primary reason commissioners cited Wednesday for wanting to stay out, rather than any fight over which - if any - region should include the county.

The road objection boils down to this: Polk County doesn't want to get stuck helping to pay for roads that provide it no benefit.

Tom Deardorff, Polk's director of long-term planning, said the proposed Tampa area beltway - which may or may not touch Polk County - is the type of massive road project the authority might help fund.

"I have more questions than I have answers," Commissioner Sam Johnson said.

Commissioner Jack Myers said that it was natural for Dockery to honor the wishes of the TPO and seek to include Polk, and it was proper for Alexander to keep it out.

"I apologize if the county commission and TPO created any tension with our delegation in Tallahassee," Myers said.

Myers and Johnson particularly leapt to the defense of Alexander.

Both said he had been criticized unfairly in news reports about Polk's relationship with the authority.

They objected to reporting they said implied Alexander sought to keep Polk out of the Bay area authority to help the prospects of the Heartland Parkway, a proposed 152-mile toll road that would create a half-loop from Lakeland to extreme northeast Polk County and then stretch south to the outskirts of Fort Myers.

Alexander is president of Atlantic Blue Group, which is the majority shareholder of Alico Inc. Both companies own tens of thousands of rural acres in the rough path of the road.

"J.D.'s unnecessarily taken a beating on this. It's unfortunate," Myers said.

Myers, Johnson and Commissioner Jean Reed all spoke glowingly about the possibility of the Heartland Parkway, but Myers dismissed the notion that Alexander is somehow pulling strings to get it built.

"J.D.'s getting a little more credit than he deserves, even though he's a powerful senator," he said.

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