

Residents propose ways to ease traffic

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TAMPA - Some wanted a rail line through Westchase running from Pinellas County to Tampa International Airport. Others envisioned some kind of mass transit loop around east Hillsborough. Still others demanded a direct link from the airport to Sun City Center.

Dozens of neighborhood leaders and community activists gathered Tuesday to brainstorm where light-rail lines and rapid-transit bus lines should crisscross Hillsborough County.

They were told to suspend their disbelief and identify where transit lines should connect the places where Hillsborough residents live, work and play.

This was all part of the Hillsborough Metropolitan Planning Organization's study of local transit needs. The MPO is pitching light rail as a way to handle the county's growth. The agency will present specific plans to the public later this year.

People brought strong opinions Tuesday.

"Where I live, a lot of people don't want to drive anymore," said Uta Kuhn of Sun City Center. "We need a park-and-ride, a direct link to the airport. The shuttle takes you 2 1/2 hours, the airport limo costs \$55 and a taxi costs \$80."

About 50 people met at the Florida State Fairgrounds in the afternoon, with a similar crowd expected Tuesday night.

They split into groups, gathered around giant maps and strung pieces of ribbon to identify needed transit lines.

Some of their ideas:

- Connect New Tampa to downtown, somehow.
- Ditto with State Road 60 and downtown.
- Run a south county loop through Gibsonton, Riverview, Valrico, Brandon, Palm River and downtown Tampa.
- Have rapid transit buses on the Crosstown Expressway's elevated lanes.
- Extend the downtown streetcar through neighborhoods like Seminole Heights.
- Run some kind of commuter line all the way up and down Dale Mabry Highway, from MacDill Air Force Base to Pasco County.

- Use existing CSX railroad tracks to link a downtown-to-University of South Florida line to Carrollwood and Westchase.

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