



Riding the rails to traffic relief?

Last Edited: Monday, 24 Sep 2007, 6:06 PM EDT
Created: Monday, 24 Sep 2007, 5:59 PM EDT

TAMPA - Hillsborough and Pinellas County traffic is a log jammed gridlocked mess days during peak hours.

Forty years in the future, Bay Area leaders hope bumper-to-bumper traffic is a thing of the past.

"A modern transport system is really the only thing the region lacks," said Tampa Mayor Pam Iorio. "We have it all, really."

Still, public transportation -- light rail, especially -- has been a hard sell to taxpayers.

"It's our Achilles' heel," said Iorio. "We're behind the times."

Inside a Channelside movie theater, the Hillsborough County Metropolitan Planning Organization presented the plan they've been working on for the past year to handle the growth the area will see over the next 40 years: Transit 2050.

They've studied the effects and gotten feedback from community leaders and area residents. They say this is the most comprehensive plan they've compiled.

"Over time our drive time is going to get longer and longer, congestion is going to get worse and worse and this plan will look better and better," said Alan Steinbeck, Project Manager of Transit 2050.

Its centerpiece is light rail.

There's the red line from Pinellas to Hillsborough, serving Westshore, Downtown Tampa, Ybor City, USF, and New Tampa.

The blue line would serve Brandon at Lithia Pinecrest and Highway 60 into Westshore and the Airport

The green line would serve south Tampa to Gandy and Westshore.

It would all tie in with bus lines already in service and commuter lines that would use existing CSX lines.

The Hillsborough MPO hopes the plan passes muster with the County Commission next week.

In 40 years, Mayor Iorio imagines travel on the Howard Frankland in rush hour:

"One day, I think they will be a span built just for light rail and the people sitting on the bridge will look over and see the rail and people zipping by wondering why they're not there. That is our future," she said.

Some like the plan -- but say it needs work -- like Ron Rotella, Westshore Business District Director.

"I wonder how people get from South Tampa to the Westshore business district to the interstate to the airport, and the response is bus service," said Rotella, "I look at Westshore and it's two lanes -- no place for a bus to stop."



A new transportation plan aims to cut down on gridlock.

Others wonder how much time commuters will really save.

"The average commute is about 45 to 50 minutes. If you can cut that in half you can sell that in New Tampa," said Shawn Harrison with the Tampa Bay Area Regional Transit Authority.

Mayor Iorio and others agree. It's a start. It's one of the best plan they've seen, and that's a step in the right direction.

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