



## Senate OKs Bay Area Transit Authority

By JOSH POLTILOVE The Tampa Tribune

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TALLAHASSEE - A plan to help create regional mass transit in the Tampa Bay area was approved Wednesday by the state Senate.

The bill forms the Tampa Bay Area Regional Transportation Authority, representing seven counties including Hillsborough, Pasco and Pinellas. The group's transportation plans could include light rail or bus rapid transit.

Sen. Mike Fasano, R-New Port Richey, said getting the bill passed was his top priority this legislative session.

"It feels great," he said. "We've accomplished something to help the Tampa Bay area, to help meet our transportation needs."

The bill still requires House approval.

Rep. Bill Galvano, R-Bradenton, expects the House bill to come up for a vote next week.

Also this week, the House and Senate agreed the state should provide \$1 million for the group's start-up costs. In their initial versions of this year's state budget, the Senate funded the group but the House did not.

Fasano was chairman of the Senate's Transportation and Economic Development Appropriations committee and helped push for the funding.

"They're going to need to hire staff and get offices and get equipment and get organized," he said. "A million dollars is probably more than what they need, but I'm hoping it'll last them a couple of years, until they start getting funding from the Department of Transportation and the federal government."

The Tampa Bay Partnership, a regional economic development group, pushed for the transportation authority's creation.

Joe Smith, co-chairman of a regional transportation board for the Tampa Bay Partnership, argued during legislative committee meetings that the authority is needed to help create a "reasonable, safe and economic way" for people to head from where they live to where they work.

The bill was a priority for Galvano as well. He said there were about 100 meetings about creating the authority during the past 13 months across the Tampa Bay region.

The group will help counties work together to improve mobility within the region and help create their transportation future, Galvano said.

He said receiving Senate approval Wednesday and funding approval this week were significant steps.

"It's going great," Galvano said. "We're seeing the fruits of a lot of work, a lot of collaboration."

The bill moved smoothly through committees on its way to the floor.

Perhaps the biggest difference between the bill's House and Senate versions was the authority's name. The House called it the Bay Area Regional Transportation Authority, and the Senate called it the Tampa Bay Regional Transportation Authority. A compromise recently was reached.

The bill directs the authority to work with local governments to develop a sweeping transportation plan by July 2009.

If created, the authority would have 16 members, including the mayors or designees of St. Petersburg and Tampa and county commissioners from Hillsborough, Pasco, Pinellas, Citrus, Hernando, Manatee and Sarasota counties.

### WHAT'S NEXT

The Senate approved SB 506 on Wednesday. House Bill 251 awaits a hearing on the House floor.

Sponsors

**SB 506:** Sen. Mike Fasano, R-New Port Richey, fasano

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(850) 487-5062

**HB 251:** Rep. Bill Galvano, R-Bradenton, bill.galvano

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