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Transit study reveals possible rail plan for Hillsborough [listen](#)

09/24/07 WMNF Evening News Monday

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By *Seán Kinane*

The Hillsborough Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) discussed its plan for the county's transit with members of the public and stakeholders at the Channelside Cinemas near downtown Tampa today.

About 50 people heard about the MPO's Transit Concept for 2050.

The purpose of the MPO is to make transportation policy; its board consists of representatives from local governments and transportation agencies. Tampa Mayor Pam Iorio commented on the comprehensive nature of the plan.

“Well, I think the plan that the MPO has put out after a lot of community input makes good sense for our county. It deals with commuters who go from the suburbs to our urban core. It's sensible. It also has a very important link from Hillsborough to Pinellas County via the Howard Frankland. ... But we also have to focus on a bus system that feeds that rail. ... So it's got to be a comprehensive approach of circulators, busses, and a form of rail. And it truly has to be regional in nature.”

Iorio said that once a smart transit plan is in place, the voters will get behind it and be willing to fund the project.

“I wouldn't view going to the voters for anything until at least 2010, because right now we're just looking at it from a conceptual standpoint. The other day at the Tampa Bay [Area] Regional Transportation Authority, we said, hey, let's look at this plan, which includes what we're seeing today for the whole seven counties, and let's really focus on that for the next step of analysis. People know; people have been ahead of elected officials on this issue for a long time. I have felt that way, that they know we need transit.”

The Tampa Bay Area Regional Transportation Authority (TBARTA) is responsible for producing a regional multimodal transportation master plan for the seven coastal counties from Sarasota to Citrus. The MPO Transit Concept for 2050 includes three light rail lines, four commuter rail lines and a complementary bus network with connections between all of these at hubs.

Light rail is powered by overhead electrical lines, has the ability to make relatively tight turns and climbs and can run up to 70 mph. The proposed light rail lines include one going from New Tampa and possibly Pasco past USF to downtown Tampa and continuing to Pinellas County.

Another route would start in East Brandon or even Polk County, go through downtown Tampa and the Tampa International Airport terminal and continue to northwest Hillsborough with a possible extension to northern Pinellas County.

The third light rail line goes from downtown Tampa through south Tampa. WMNF asked Mayor Iorio which line would be built first.

“There are two possible lines, one is the downtown [Tampa to] Westshore to St. Pete and the other is the University [of South Florida, Tampa campus] to downtown [Tampa]. Both of those lines, and we might want to do both simultaneously, I think will serve the greatest number of people.”

In contrast to light rail, commuter rail is powered by a locomotive engine and must be on heavier rail lines such as existing freight lines and can also go about 70 mph.

The four proposed commuter rail lines all have a terminus in downtown Tampa with the other terminus in a neighboring county. One will go to Pasco, another to Manatee or Sarasota, and the other continues to Polk County, including one that could be the long-planned high-speed rail along the I-4 corridor.

Many of these proposed lines could be leased from the CSX rail company and use existing rail lines, similar to a recent deal the company reached for commuter rail in the Orlando area.

But Mayor Pam Iorio thinks that other options should also be considered.

“I’m not so sure about using the existing CSX rail line. As we have seen even in the newspaper recently, the deal that was struck in Central Florida with CSX, they’re not the easiest group to work with. We’ve got to put together a deal that makes the best sense for the taxpayers. Whether or not that is with CSX, we have to make sure that we have options, and independence has to be one of those options. Maybe we strike a business deal with them and use their right of way, but you know what, Maybe not. And if so, there’s always got to be a Plan B. ... So, you know, I’ve changed my view of that a little bit over the past year, because I do think it’s always good to have a Plan B that gives you more independence and more flexibility.”

Business owner Joe Redner likes the Transit Plan but shares Mayor Iorio’s skepticism of leasing right of way from CSX.

“Oh, I think that it needs a little tweaking, it’s a hell of a beginning. There’s some of it going on the CSX railroad lines, I think that’s doing it a little bit on the cheap, and there’s places where it can go but getting started is good. Now, if we can get the petty differences between the county and the city and get the County Commission to work with the city to do this then I think it’ll go a long way.”

Lucy Ayer is the executive director of the Hillsborough County MPO and had a different take on the CSX issue.

“It’s not necessarily everything is relying on the existing rail track. If it’s commuter lines, you would think that that’s the logical place to start and that’s what is happening here. But we also have light rail proposals that are not on the CSX line.”

Tampa Mayor Iorio said that in order for mass transit to work, planners have to allow some areas to become more densely populated.

Temple Terrace Mayor Joe Affronti is the chair of the Hillsborough County MPO and thinks that a transit plan like the one described today would benefit his city.

Former Tampa City Council Member Shawn Harrison, who lost his bid for re-election to Mary Mulhern last November, was appointed by Gov. Charlie Crist last week to be one of the three at-large members of TBARTA.

WMNF asked Harrison whether he thought that this Hillsborough MPO plan could be smoothly integrated into the seven-county regional plans of TBARTA.

“Absolutely, I think that this could be a great framework to start from. And you know the TBARTA group has already gone down this path a long way. So what we need to do is make sure that this map is going to properly fit into what their plans are and you’ve got 90 percent of the planning already done for this regional transportation system. Then it just becomes a matter of the individual governments going back to their people and being able to sell it.”

Ayer agrees that there could be coordination between this Hillsborough plan and TBARTA’s regional transit project.

“Well, I think that that actually is the beauty of it, when you have all the people at various layers to work on this together, that’s when things happen. We started out in Hillsborough County, but all the stuff people going to see will all be integrated into this TBARTA study. As a matter of fact, there was a motion made last Friday [at TBARTA] to use a regional map as the basis for TBARTA. And we [MPO] participate in putting that regional map together.”

WMNF asked Ayer what the timetable might be for the completion of the MPO’s transit plan.

“If there is money, then within five years you could see much better buses. Maybe within ten years, fifteen years, you see the rail.”

The MPO will consider the final recommendations its Nov. 6 meeting.

For more information:

[Hillsborough Metropolitan Planning Organization](#)

[MPA Transit Study](#)

[TBARTA](#)

[Tampa Bay Partnership](#)

[West Central Florida Strategic Regional Transit Needs Assessment](#)

[Reality Check Tampa Bay](#)

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