



Slow Collaboration Promises To Bring Fast Transit To Region

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It was standing room only on Charlotte's new light-rail cars during the opening round of the ACC basketball tournament. The city is delighted with how its popular rail line helps move people during big events.

Tampa should look at Charlotte's system with envy, because a decade ago the cities were at the same stage of planning. Yet today in Tampa, rail plans have gone nowhere, local bus service is being reduced because of tax cuts and commuters stuck in traffic jams are frustrated.

Yet help is on the way. The Tampa Bay Regional Transportation Authority, called TBARTA, is assembling local plans and gathering public opinions to design a master plan for connecting the region. It's a slow process, with the opening of the first rail line estimated to be at least 10 years away.

But finally, at least, the process is moving forward.

The preliminary map of the seven-county board shows passenger rail bridging the bay between Tampa and St. Petersburg and tags the bridge a "primary link." Similar conceptual rail lines appear all over the urban map because of strong support from the public, even conservative business leaders who are determined not to waste a dime on government boondoggles.

Other Southern cities such as Houston, Dallas and Atlanta have discovered that rail can whisk tens of thousands of commuters to work each day in a cleaner, faster and more economical manner than highways. An efficient transit system gives a city a competitive advantage.

Tampa has lagged behind most regions on rail because politicians representing the suburbs and rural areas have been skeptical of the costs and advantages. After HART, the bus agency, designed a federally approved rail plan some years ago, Hillsborough commissioners refused to ask voters if they would pay for it.

Today, Hillsborough County Administrator Pat Bean says she doesn't believe local citizens want rail transit, which explains the lack of leadership from county center.

We believe the traveling public almost certainly would buy into the option of going somewhere without cranking up a car if they were offered a plan that included rail, buses and better roads.

Hillsborough still has an active rail plan. Approved by the Metropolitan Planning Agency in November, it envisions by the year 2050 some 64 miles of light rail, many new bus routes and many miles of commuter rail that would tie into a regional system that also serves Pinellas, Pasco, Polk and Manatee.

The plan would put 34 percent of households and 49 percent of jobs within a mile of a transit station. But with an estimated construction cost around \$5 billion, it is not attracting political champions.

The routes are designed to dovetail into a larger planning effort by TBARTA. The regional agency has just finished a series of public workshops in the seven-county region. On display at each were maps of the seven member counties showing every conceivable highway or rail corridor, even a ferry line across the bay.

The idea is not to build everything, but to put everything on the table and see what people like. Then engineering studies will help figure out prices and other details.

And then? No one is sure.

Much harder than drawing lines is raising money. TBARTA has no power to tax. It can issue revenue bonds to build toll roads, but it cannot, under existing law, subsidize rail, a water taxi or buses.

Transit advocates speculate that in 2010, voters could be asked, county by county, to fund the agency by raising the local sales tax. The issue is complicated because HART also wants to ask voters to exchange its property tax for a half-cent sales tax that could help expand service and perhaps even add rail.

It remains unclear whether voters will authorize a new sales tax for either or both agencies, but a coordinated rather than competitive approach will be essential to build public confidence.

The main reason for pushing ahead with the controversial decision to raise taxes and build rail is not hard to explain. Hillsborough Commissioner Mark Sharpe summed it up in November when he recommended approval for the MPO rail plan: "We can't build enough roads to solve our congestion problem."

He's right, but it's important not to push too fast and run the project off the rails before the public gets aboard. The best strategy is to get a good plan, then ask the public to fund it.

The planning is being done in a climate increasingly favorable to new rail and better bus service, what with gasoline headed toward \$4 a gallon and Congress talking about tighter regulations on emissions.

While most other large cities are enjoying the benefits of good transit, commuters here can't be blamed for being disappointed at how little has been accomplished.

Many are eager to support a plan more imaginative than wider roads and more traffic lights.

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