

Tune in for conclusion of 'As the Roads Clog'

By Sharon Tubbs

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Vanessa Cephus is interim president of the union for HART workers, so it's no surprise that she's unhappy with cutbacks the bus system made this year to routes.

It's up for debate whether the bus line should have whacked more high-level management positions instead, but Cephus raises a good point about long-range goals.

We talked briefly after a successful event this week sponsored by the Metropolitan Planning Organization. The MPO invited the public to Channelside Cinemas to learn about its plan for a rail system that would stretch into southern Hillsborough, New Tampa, South Tampa and Pinellas and Pasco counties. (City and county officials will decide whether to add the concept to Hillsborough's long-range transportation plan in November.)

About 100 people showed up, ate free popcorn and won raffled trinkets like pens and T-shirts. Radio personality Jack Harris introduced a round of five-minute talks from suits encouraging everyone to raise the mass transit banner.

"Just imagine what the future might hold for us," Harris said, calling himself "just a cheerleader" for the effort that officials hope to be in full swing by 2050.

City Council member John Dingfelder joined the cheer, saying statistics show that rail will save us lots of money on car mileage and other travel expenses considered routine these days.

County Commissioner Mark Sharpe said the plan is for future generations, which is why he brought along his young son.

Sharpe was somewhat of a cheerleader, too - for Harris, as much as rail. Harris' popularity will be key in getting the word out to the community, Sharpe said.

"Jack Harris has got a wonderful voice," he said.

But the premier message from slides with colorful route patterns flashing on the theater screen was this: Adding more lanes to highways won't solve our traffic problems. We must do something.

One woman smartly asked if anyone thought about that before the current multimillion-dollar project to widen Interstate 275 began.

Indeed they had, MPO executive director Lucilla Ayer said. Planners have worked with the state Department of Transportation and hope to put rail on the highway.

The whole thing excited Julia Gorzka, 36, who moved here from Manhattan about nine years ago. She lives in the South Tampa area and is part of a group of professionals who are all about smart urban growth.

Her only disappointment is that rail lines will take so long. "There's so many of us who want to see this happen."

Others didn't get such goose bumps after listening to a plan sure to cost in the billions.

John Moll lives in a 100-year-old farmhouse in Seminole Heights. To him, the MPO presentation was a bunch of talk about more, more, more ...

"Seems like they want more development, which brings in more people, which brings in more congestion," he said on his way out the door.

"I realize everything's going from rural to townhouses, but I don't like it."

Arizona Jenkins came to make sure the commuter rail system could accommodate people in wheelchairs like him. Ayer assured him it would.

Jenkins lives in Ybor City and represents the New Horizon Support Group, for people with disabilities. If transit will help them get where they want to go more easily, he's all for it.

"Folks want to go to the movies at night," he said, adding that cutbacks in bus routes have made it hard to get around.

Which brings us back to Cephus, president of Amalgamated Transit Unit Local 1593, which she said represents about 250 HART workers, including mechanics, drivers and customer service employees.

She's all for commuter rail, too. But organizers seem to dismiss one key ingredient: Tampa's bus system is hurting.

"I think the plan should have been done 15 years ago," Cephus said. "But at the same time, I feel our HART management doesn't have the vision to accommodate the plan."

Commuter rail will require more frequent bus routes, not the cutbacks that occurred this year. Last week's City Times detailed plans to eliminate a little-used route to Hyde Park, for instance. Several routes were cut this year, and others run less frequently.

But the rail system will rely heavily on buses to get people to transit stations, and Cephus hopes HART's new director, David Armijo, will ramp up the bus system, especially because he came from the more metropolitan Los Angeles area.

I wasn't able to catch up with Armijo before going to press this week, but HART has said it was forced to trim routes because of property tax cuts. Only a few lesser-used routes were cut; more popular ones were maintained.

It's clear that others see Armijo as a bright light for mass transit. "He's dynamite," Sharpe said.

As for Cephus, she saw at least one positive:

"Thank God it's 2050 because that's how long it's going to take us to get HART right."