



## Washington Reviews Bay Transit Plan

By **BILLY HOUSE** The Tampa Tribune

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WASHINGTON - The Tampa Tribune caught up Thursday with Ronnie Duncan, the Pinellas County Commission chairman, while he was in Washington, D.C., to meet with Federal Transit Administration officials and others. Duncan gave the FTA an early peek at a proposal by a group of Tampa Bay planners and elected officials for a regional system of trains, high-speed buses and water ferries. Duncan and several officials in that group will be part of a new seven-county Tampa Bay area transportation authority that will consider the plan as a starting point for its work.

Here's some of what Duncan said about how well the plan was being received by FTA officials:

Why are you here?

I'm not asking for anything, but basically educating them on what we're doing regionally, and what kind of planning is going on.

What kind of reception did you receive?

We aren't far enough along to talk about any kind of timelines or money or anything of that nature &hellip I think they were appreciative of the fact that we were there to bring them in as a partner early on. I see this as a partnership and not just them being a bucket of money.

There was no specific talk of pots of [federal] money or funding programs at this point?

No. It's really too early for that &hellip my reason for going to the FTA was really just to make them aware of what we've been doing regionally, how we got there, and also to see their perspective on whether there's anything we're doing wrong &hellip They didn't say anything negative. But obviously, they weren't going to commit to anything.

They didn't make any concrete suggestions?

Here's what they said, which I thought it was a great suggestion, and that is that Denver's a very similar situation and could be a model.

How's that?

They [Denver area local governments] could have done years ago what they are doing now, and that is to bring the whole community to the table - all the stakeholders - to talk about [a regional transit] plan and get them to buy in upfront. They've begun to put the pieces together &hellip but perhaps more importantly, as they came to FTA for money or even for [congressional] appropriations they came holistically, and they came as a group.

Does that remain a challenge for the Tampa Bay area? Or is it moving that way?

I think it is moving that way today. We got to keep that train on the track, no pun intended.

Realistically, when is the first time anyone would see the fruits of this plan?

Some of these things are already in the pipeline. For instance, in St. Petersburg, there's a bus rapid-transit corridor that is designed already, and the application for [federal funding] is coming to Washington as we speak. It's about a 16-mile corridor that runs from downtown St. Petersburg to the beaches &hellip that could be up and running late in '09. Also, we are in Pinellas County and also Hillsborough County is looking at bus rapid transit in other corridors. We both are doing simultaneous studies as to what corridors we should prioritize. So, some of this plan comes together as early as '09, 2010, 2011.

Light rail?

The light rail component &hellip it may be as much as 10 years down the road.

Any estimate about what the light rail would cost at this point?

You know, I asked the FTA [Wednesday] about what they're seeing around the country. And they are looking at grade [tracks that are ground level and not elevated], without the real estate costs, as somewhere in the \$75 million to \$80 million a mile

range.

Would land have to be taken for the rail routes?

Not necessarily. That is the beauty of this rail piece. In the sense that in the middle of I-275, there's a 60-foot &hellip median from St. Pete all the way into Tampa. It goes across the [Howard Frankland] bridge, by the way. That median has some infrastructure in it to store water and other things, to accommodate rail. It was designed that way &hellipso we're not starting from scratch there. We really don't have to go get land, or buy land or condemn land.

When is the earliest a federal bill could authorize funding for local light rail?

2009-2010.

Does that time frame work?

Yeah. But the big piece of that is we have got to come to the table with a local match. So, what that [time frame] allows us to do is to go and determine what other buckets of money we have got available &hellip state and local.

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