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## **All aboard!**

*Manatee, Sarasota need regional transportation board*

Manatee and Sarasota counties occupy the same spots on a map of Florida that they did at the start of the week. But a vote Wednesday in the Legislature is likely to push them significantly closer to five of their neighbors in the Tampa Bay region.

The changes would arrive by way of a regional transportation authority designed to expand the ability of the member counties to raise money for roads and other projects extending across jurisdictional lines.

The plan, whose chief architects include Rep. Bill Galvano, R-Bradenton, holds tremendous promise -- especially if its participants focus on mass-transit initiatives to relieve the pressure on existing roads.

Galvano, a longtime supporter of creating a better rail network in Florida, has pushed for years for a broader regional approach to transportation planning.

This year, his bill to establish the Tampa Bay Regional Transportation Authority passed the House and Senate with little dispute or fanfare. Gov. Charlie Crist, a St. Petersburg native who is well aware of the region's transportation woes, is expected to sign the measure.

The authority would encompass the counties of Hillsborough, Pinellas, Citrus, Hernando and Pasco, as well as Manatee and Sarasota. A 16-member board, primarily composed of county commissioners and city mayors, would oversee operations.

The authority would offer key opportunities that now don't exist -- starting with a master transportation plan for the region.

Through user fees and the sale of bonds, the authority could raise money to accelerate numerous projects, such as toll roads and rail, intended to ease traffic in all or part of the seven-county area.

When the idea first came up last year, some local officials expressed fears that the authority would be dominated by the counties north of Tampa Bay, with Sarasota and Manatee forced to fight for leftovers.

That's definitely a danger but -- as leaders in both counties have pointed out -- it's better to have a role in the process than not. The state certainly isn't doing its part, through either funding or long-term planning, to meet the transportation needs of Manatee and Sarasota.

Unless an authority like this fills the void, it's unlikely that long-overdue projects such as light rail, will ever become a reality.

If the authority works as designed, it will reduce the region's chances of a future of complete gridlock -- and an ugly sort of "neighborliness" that drivers would definitely rather avoid.

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