



Commuter Ferry Idea Floated Once Again

By ANTHONY McCARTNEY The Tampa Tribune

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TAMPA - Hillsborough County officials are looking to resurrect previously abandoned ideas for commuter ferry service in the Tampa Bay area.

The county is paying for a modest, \$9,200 study to see whether ferries could one day link southern Hillsborough residents with downtown Tampa and possibly St. Petersburg.

The study's results are months away but represent an important first step to finding alternatives for south Hillsborough commuters who work on both sides of the Bay, said Ned Baier, manager of the county's Transportation and Land Development Review Division.

Using a ferry service instead of cars to get downtown is not a new idea. Public and private entities have studied proposals over the years.

Those efforts have gone nowhere.

One study several years ago, funded by a private developer planning a residential complex in the Channel District, died when the residential project failed.

"It sounds like a great idea, but the greatest obstacle to it is you've got to find a big parking lot on the waterfront," said Anne Madden, a Ruskin resident and member of the county's Citizens Advisory Committee.

"It's not the water routes that are the problem," Madden said, noting that ferries have been proposed many times.

Baier said the consultant hired to conduct the current study will collect previous studies, attempt to find potential launching sites and identify companies that might operate the system.

Miami-Dade County officials have studied ferries for about five years, and they recently approved a pilot program that could launch by late 2009.

A major hurdle to Miami's ferry program remains environmental concerns, specifically manatee safety in Biscayne Bay. To protect the creatures, officials are contemplating two types of vessels: catamarans and Hovercrafts.

Manatee safety would be less of a concern for a ferry operating in Tampa and Hillsborough bays. Protection zones exist along the shoreline and near downtown but do not extend throughout the bays.

Other concerns about the Miami project are likely to factor into Hillsborough's decision - cost and travel time.

"I have to provide some kind of service that is attractive to people," said Jesus Guerra, assistant transportation manager for the Miami-Dade Metropolitan Planning Organization.

He said no per-trip costs have been set. Estimated startup costs are \$13 million to \$16 million, and annual operational costs could reach \$4.5 million. Miami hopes to get federal assistance.

Hillsborough's study is not expected to be completed until the summer. If it shows ferry service is a viable transportation option, further research could be folded into a regional transportation plan, Baier said.

By then, officials in Tampa and St. Petersburg, as well as any private operators, will need to be involved in the planning, he said.

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