

The 'duh' factor of mass transit

By HOWARD TROXLER

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Okay, everybody's talking about mass transit for Tampa Bay, louder than ever.

The mayor of Tampa got sworn in for her second term on Sunday and stressed it.

All the area's elected pooh-bahs got together in February to hold a summit. It was a veritable United Nations.

A bunch of business groups got together in March and agreed mass transit is essential to our future.

Our legislators are working on creating an agency to oversee the whole region.

A couple weeks ago, the state Department of Transportation even chimed in with possible major routes:

- St. Petersburg to the Gateway area, across to Tampa's West Shore and downtown, and east to Lakeland.
- Tampa to the University of South Florida, east Pasco and Brooksville.
- West Shore to northwest Hillsborough, central Pasco and Brooksville.
- St. Petersburg to north Pinellas and New Port Richey.
- St. Petersburg south to Bradenton and Sarasota.

(I would get around to Lakeland and Brooksville a little later, but you get the idea.)

Okeydoke. Let's pretend that we are designing a system. I propose a Golden Rule, and a Necessary Corollary.

The Golden Rule: People have to want to ride it.

You might say: Duh! But the history of failed mass-transit systems is instructive: It has always been easier for government planners to design the system that is possible, instead of the system that works.

Let's say the Mass Transit Fairy magically gave us a rail system tomorrow that linked downtown Tampa, St. Petersburg and Clearwater and nothing else. It would be a colossal failure.

What, am I going to hop off at the corner of Kennedy and Westshore and trudge six blocks north to work on an August morning? Or dodge highway traffic on foot across Roosevelt Boulevard? Or get off at Fort Harrison in Clearwater and walk over the bridge to the beach?

I have to be able to get to the Bucs or Yankees or Devil Rays game as well. I have to be able to get to International Plaza, and Raymond James, and USF and, let's see ... oh, right. The airport. It would be nice, too, if I could hop off within walking distance of the dry cleaner on the bus home, and then hop on the next one.

This brings us to the Necessary Corollary: Rail or not, mass transit requires reinventing the bus.

Tampa's mayor, Pam Iorio, talks about a system of downtown "circulators" constantly taking people exactly where they want to go. St. Petersburg's mayor, Rick Baker, will talk to you about the concept of bus rapid transit - frequent, fast buses that do the same.

It has to be that way. Even if we had rail, it would be useless if it just dumped riders onto the Marion Street transitway in Tampa, or at the Williams Park hub in St. Petersburg, and abandoned them to the current bus systems.

Look, everything is up in the air. We don't know yet who's in charge, what we want, or how to pay for it.

But the goal has to be a system that people want to ride, and that takes them where they want to go - else the critics are right, and we should just build more highways.

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Every day Howard Troxler posts extra commentaries, updates and interaction with readers online. Go to TroxBlog by clicking on the "Blogs" link from TampaBay.com, or by typing the Web address blogs.tampabay.com/troxler.

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