

Want good regional mass transit? New study urges regional governance first to make it happen



Robert Trigaux, Times Business Columnist

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The hurdles confronting a regional approach to transportation in Tampa Bay feel like a tale as old as time. Over and over, Hillsborough or Pinellas counties have independently pressed their voters to support a single county mass transit project only to see withering defeats at the ballot box.

Maybe Tampa Bay is failing in the voting booth because the metro area — one of the nation's largest lacking a comprehensive, multi-county transportation plan — keeps putting the cart before the horse. You can't pursue a regional transportation strategy when most of the players involved still operate inside and are beholden to separate county powers.

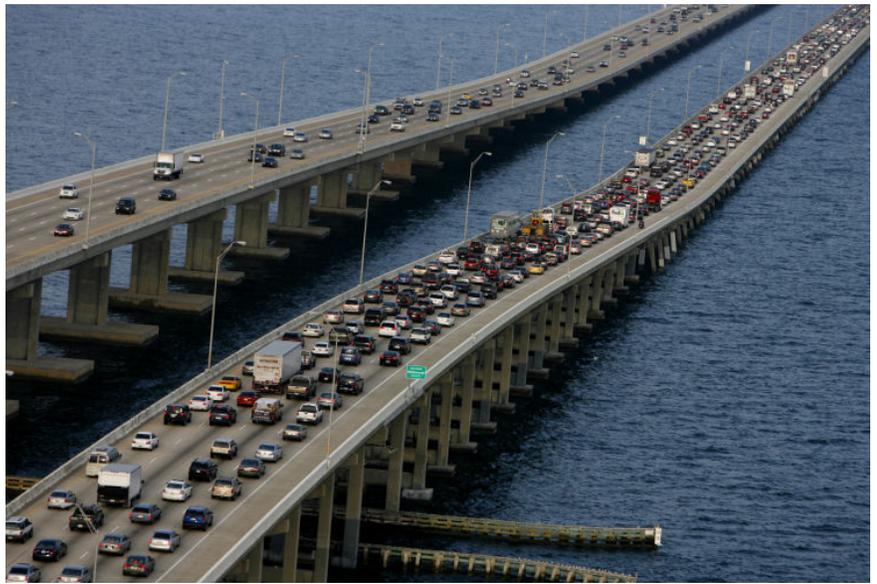
Enter the Tampa Bay Partnership. The regional economic development group reinvented itself last year keen on making regional mass transit — whatever form it may eventually take — a realistic goal.

Forget the ballot box for now. This is about reorganizing some of the existing key players to think, restructure and then act regionally.

"A one-county approach does very little to solve the regional challenge — the real challenge," Tampa Bay Partnership CEO Rick Homans said in an interview.

To lend credibility and detail to the notion of taking a regional approach to transportation, the Tampa Bay Partnership today is officially releasing a study titled "The Need for Regional Governance in Tampa Bay" and meeting with nearly two dozen state legislators from this region to discuss the findings. Two business leaders — Tampa Bay Lightning owner and real estate developer Jeff Vinik and Vology CEO Barry Shevlin — are heading the Partnership's transportation working group on this matter.

The study was prepared for the Partnership by researchers at the Eno Center for Transportation, a long established, non-partisan think-tank in Washington, D.C. that promotes innovative policies in transportation. Eno is named for



Forget counties using the ballot box to fix Tampa Bay's long-standing commuting traffic woes, a new study concludes. Instead, it suggests the counties band together behind a regional solution. [Times file photo]

William Phelps Enos, who a century or so ago helped modernize traffic plans for such major cities as New York, London, and Paris, and was among inventors to popularize stop signs, taxi stands and pedestrian safety islands among other transit features still popular today.

The 18-page study concludes that some core issues — namely transportation, environment, poverty and crime — do not stop at artificial county borders and outstrip the resources of individual cities. Broader solutions are called for.

"The Tampa Bay region needs to reform its transportation governance in response to these trends," the Enos study concludes. It warns a county-driven transit approach is "out-of-step" with how people and goods move throughout a region. Too many local projects end up competing for too little money, it states, and run counter to federal and state efforts to encourage thinking and action on a regional scale.

The Enos study urges Tampa Bay embrace a regional approach while there seems to be a groundswell of civic, corporate and political willingness to try bolder ideas. "This presents a generational opportunity for real change," Enos researchers stated. "The region should not miss out on that opportunity."

Among the study's recommendations is a merger of the Hillsborough, Pinellas and Pasco county level metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), along with those in certain nearby counties. The result would be a single regional MPO, which is the norm these days in the vast majority of major metros in the country.

The study's arrival did not happen in a vacuum. A regional transit feasibility plan backed by the Florida Department of Transportation is also under way that will offer more concrete transportation ideas. The goal, said Homans, is to have a regional vision for transit in the area by some time in 2018, and a plan to phase it in over time.

If Tampa Bay wants a modern regional transit system, then it needs to modernize the organizations that will govern it, Homans said. "We are at the beginning of a long and challenging process.

Our biggest hurdle," he acknowledged, "is trust. Creating a regional structure involves building trust between the leaders of the involved counties."

He cautioned the road ahead may prove rocky at times.

"We will stub our toes doing this if we have not built the right operational plan for it."

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Where Tampa Bay workers commute

Nearly a quarter million people in the metro area live in one county but commute to another for work. That represents 20 percent of the total commuting traffic. Most commuters live and work in the same county.

Residence to Workplace Commuters

Pasco to Hillsborough 51,525

Pinellas to Hillsborough 42,358

Hillsborough to Pinellas 32,626

Pasco to Pinellas 23,142

Hillsborough to Pasco 9,548

Other inter-county 74,077

Total inter-county 233,276

Source: *Eno Center for Transportation, U.S. Census Bureau*

5 takeaways from Eno report

1. Backed by the state, Tampa Bay should voluntarily merge its county-based MPO (metropolitan planning organization) structure to a single, independent organization not housed by a single local government.
2. The region should consider closer ties between and perhaps even a formal regional governance reform of its two main transit systems — HART (Hillsborough Area Regional Transit) and PSTA (Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority) — and Pasco County Public Transportation.
3. Since 1970, the share of poor residents residing in Tampa Bay suburbs increased by 25.2 percent. That's the second highest increase (after Atlanta) among major metro areas, and three times the national metro average. Aggravating this trend is a lack of regional mass transit to help low-income suburban residents reach better work opportunities.
4. Coordination between counties is weak. "One of the best examples of the lack of regional transit service is the fact that on weekends one can see on the HART schedule 14 buses going from Dover, in eastern Hillsborough County, to Downtown Tampa," the study states. "Meanwhile, there is absolutely no weekend service between Downtown Tampa and St. Petersburg or Clearwater, the other two large cities in Tampa Bay."
5. Only 16 percent of jobs in the Tampa Bay metro are accessible via a 90-minute transit commute. Eno attributes such weak findings to the lack of "inter-jurisdictional connection" — a problem reinforced by transit services provided on a county-by-county basis.

Source: *Eno Center for Transportation study: "The Need for Regional Governance in Tampa Bay"*

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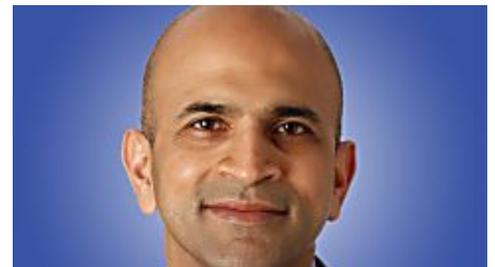
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