

Officials taking closer look at regional transportation options

By SUZETTE PORTER, Tampa Bay Newspapers
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CLEARWATER – Pinellas County Commissioners spent part of the first meeting of 2017 listening to presentations about the future of transportation in Tampa Bay.

Katharine Eagan, CEO of Hillsborough Area Regional Transit, talked about a planning effort that begins this year by the Transit Coalition, made up of HART, Pasco County Public Transportation and Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority, with guidance provided by the Tampa Bay TMA Leadership Group.

She said the effort was a Florida Department of Transportation initiative that would include a multi-county view of past studies, as well as modern alternatives, such as ride sharing and autonomous vehicles.

“It’s not just about buses, it’s anytime you’re not driving yourself,” she said. “Let’s be beyond the bus when we talk about transit. We’ve been studying transit for 20 years.”

Work to create the plan is divided into two years – the first year described as a technical “quiet period” and a second year of consensus building or the “loud period.” Information for the public will be posted on a website so people can see what is happening from the beginning, she said. But, during the “loud period,” all means of communication will be utilized including social media and community meetings.

“It’s good to engage the public before making important decisions,” Commission Dave Eggers said.

The goal is to come up with three priority projects supported by all parties that will meet Federal Transit Administration’s requirements for capital and/or operations funding. The goal is to complete work on the plan by September 2018. The plan will include coming up with a consensus about who will build the projects, who will run them and how they will be paid for. Eagan said the purpose of the evaluation plan was to determine the most competitive projects for federal funding.

Commission Chair Janet Long said a lot of talk was going on about merging local Metropolitan Planning Organizations so the region could “come together as one voice.”

Rick Homans, president and CEO of Tampa Bay Partnership, said his organization was founded in 1994 as a regional platform for economic development. The goal is “One vision. One Voice. One Region.”



Graphic courtesy of HART

Local transit officials will spend two years working on a Regional Transit Feasibility Plan to build consensus on projects that meet requirements for Federal Transit Administration’s requirements for capital and/or operations funding.

He listed four major issues that “must be addressed on a regional level to achieve real results.” Those issues include transportation and infrastructure; workforce and education; and brand and marketing.

He pointed out that local interests, such as existing county and municipal structures could “create a barrier to progress.” He said regional leaders could address these issues, adding, “Communities are most effective when the region’s most powerful and influential leaders are personally engaged and involved.”

He also listed five common success factors: CEO leadership, private funding, public sector engagement, philanthropic alignment and community benchmarking, which involves monitoring and measurement of progress towards shared community goals.

He advocates use of a transportation working group that “shapes, supports and advances a regional transportation vision and public policy agenda.”

The top transportation issues he listed include rideshare, transportation planning, transit operations and Tampa Bay Express, which is a “system of express toll lanes that will be built as an addition to existing interstate routes. These new lanes give drivers a choice of paying a toll in order to enjoy a better commute,” according to information found at www.tampabayexpress.com.

Homans said with a “regional mindset, issues were easier to solve.”

Commissioner Ken Welch asked which regions would come together to form a partnership area. Homans replied that decision would be something to make going forward. He said it made sense to include Hillsborough, Pasco and Pinellas and to consider contiguous counties such as Citrus and Sarasota.

Eggers said he concurred with that thinking but made it clear that input from local sources was critical to a regional approach.

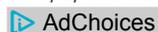
Long said it made sense to use Hillsborough, Pasco and Pinellas as the “core” and then perhaps offer an incentive for other counties to join versus looking at a “whole big area.”

“We need to go through the process and make a decision,” Homans said. “But Janet’s (Long) thinking is supported.”

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