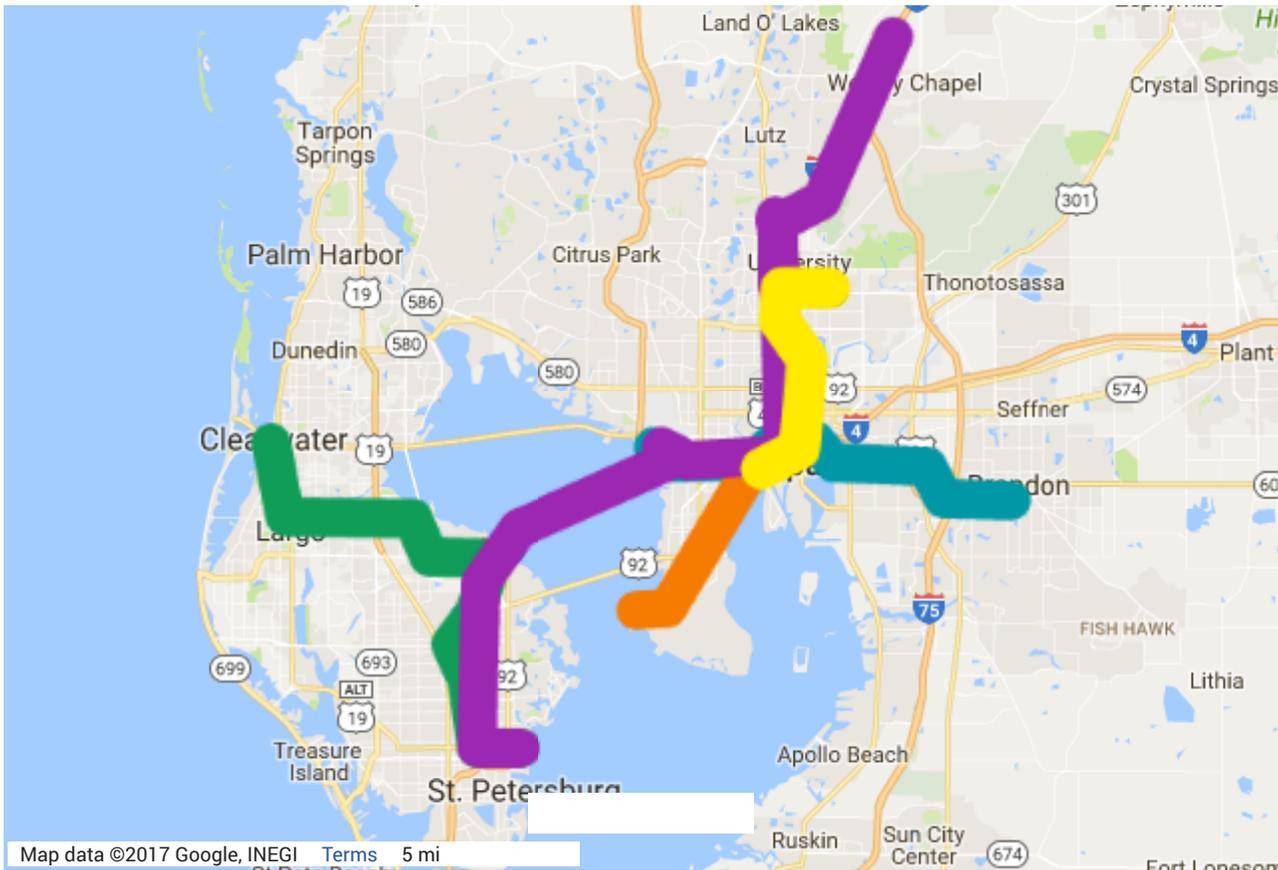


Transit corridor options ☆



## Long-awaited Tampa Bay transit study identifies five corridors for future transportation systems



Caitlin Johnston, Times Staff Writer

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The firm assembling a highly anticipated study has identified five potential routes for a future transit system in Tampa Bay.

This is the first big update in the regional premium transit feasibility plan, a cumbersome term for a process that will identify whether rail, express bus or other types of transit will best serve the region.

A team from Jacobs Engineering expects to narrow that list and recommend three specific projects — including the exact routes and the type of transit that will operate on them — by November, said Jacobs executive Scott Pringle.

Politicians and transit advocates alike have placed a lot of weight on this 2½-year study, which the Florida Department of Transportation paid \$1.5 million for and the Hillsborough Area Regional Transit Authority is overseeing. They hope it can provide some sort of blueprint for one day solving the bay area's transportation woes.

"I am depending on this study a lot to be a real, unbiased analysis of what this region needs to solve its transportation challenges," said Tampa City Council member Harry Cohen. "My hope is that they're evaluating every conceivable option."

Politicians, business leaders and residents have discussed building transit options for decades, but have failed to garner enough support or political will to fund or build most of them.

The five corridors Jacobs selected are a mix of routes between Hillsborough, Pinellas and Pasco counties, connecting the area's densest regions and busiest road corridors:

- West Shore to Brandon through downtown Tampa
- Downtown Tampa to the University of South Florida
- Wesley Chapel to USF, then to Tampa and St. Petersburg
- Clearwater to the St. Petersburg Gateway area to downtown
- South Tampa to downtown Tampa.

The potential routes were evaluated based on how many popular destinations and activity centers they served, along with the number of jobs, amenities and population per mile. The next step is to evaluate what type of transit would operate best in each area. Those modes could include a streetcar, express bus, light rail or other options.

All these routes have already been evaluated by several of the nearly 60 different transportation studies that have been conducted over the past three decades in Tampa Bay. The goal of this study is to draw on those previous findings, identify the best projects, put together an actual plan and draft state and federal grant applications to help fund them.

"We're not trying to do just another study," Pringle said. "We're trying to pull together a plan from all those studies. ... Let's build on those lessons learned and move this thing forward."

The initiative, though originally called the premium transit study when the DOT first announced it in late 2015, has since been rebranded as a feasibility plan to highlight the fact that it will produce an actual proposal for local leaders to act on.

Jacobs will ultimately identify three specific projects to build in Tampa Bay, Pringle said, and rank them in the order they should be built. Once the projects are selected, the next phases of the study will decide how to pay for them and who will maintain and operate them.

Hillsborough County Commissioner and HART board member Sandy Murman was disappointed that none of the corridors connect to South Hillsborough, the district she represents. She also complained that the firm was using out-of-date population numbers. She encouraged them to look at parts of the region, such as her district, that are experiencing more growth.

"There's a balancing act between the suburban area versus the urban area," Murman said. "I didn't see a lot out in the unincorporated areas."

Her concerns highlight one of the biggest obstacles facing transit in Tampa Bay: how to build support for a project that may not serve everybody. Ultimately, the plan is to build an expansive, integrated system with main corridors connected to other parts of the region by buses, circulators and other transit options. But creating an entire network takes time and money, and it can't all be built at once.

"To develop a transit system for a very sprawled-out community like we have is going to be very, very difficult," Murman said. "We have to work with HART to build connections to those main routes and make sure the taxpayers know we're not just going to do one area."

Murman, however, voted against the most recent attempt to raise money for transit. The Hillsborough County Commission decided in April 2016 not to put a 30-year, half-cent sales tax referendum to fund transportation on the November ballot.

Hillsborough has since found more than \$800 million in the county budget to spend on road projects. But by its own estimates, the county has more than \$8 billion worth of transportation needs in the coming decade.

Previous attempts to pass a sales tax for transportation failed in Hillsborough in 2010 and in Pinellas in 2014, largely because of a lack of support from voters outside the downtown areas. Many suburban residents see transit as something that benefits only the urban cores, and thus don't want to pay for something they won't use.

Trying to plan a regional system further complicates this. There is no regional transit agency that would oversee such a project. An attempt by state Sen. Jack Latvala, R-Clearwater, to create such an agency recently died in the Florida Senate.

There's also the issue of regional competition: If a corridor based largely in one county is chosen as the first project, leaders and citizens in other counties might feel slighted or wonder why they should support it.

"That's a very, very, very hard thing for elected officials to do," Cohen said. "But so far, I do think people understand that there are going to have to be concessions all over the place for a truly regional approach to work."

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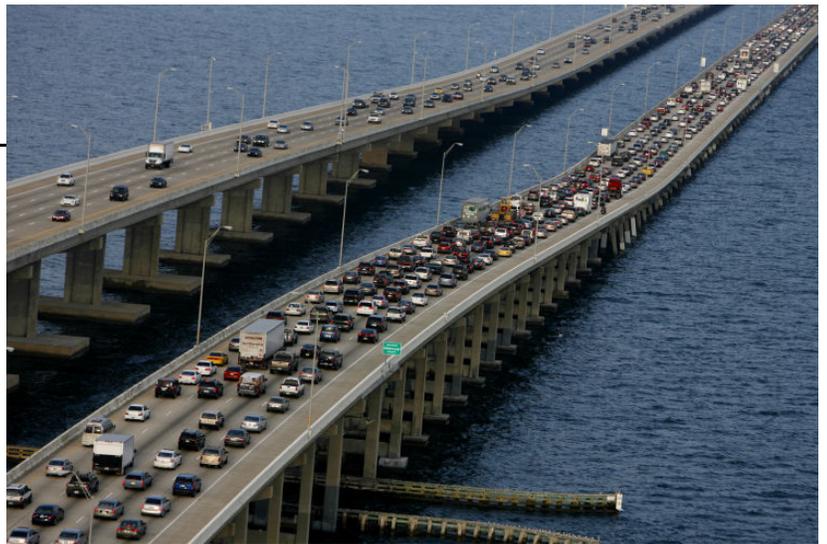
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A team from Jacobs Engineering assembling a highly anticipated study has identified five potential routes for a future transit system in Tampa Bay. It identified five corridors that could one day be served by future transit systems. [Times file photo]



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