



Hillsborough studies special bus lane

The agency will look at a rapid transit line to link downtown Tampa and USF's campus.

BY CAITLIN JOHNSTON

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TAMPA - Hillsborough County's bus agency has approved spending up to \$2.5 million in state grant money to study the possibility of a special bus lane connecting downtown Tampa and the University of South Florida.

The Hillsborough Area Regional Transit Authority board voted unanimously Monday to allow consulting firm Tindale-Oliver and Associates to start the first phase of the study, which will evaluate routes, stops and costs for the project.

The bus rapid transit line - a term for a route that usually has its own dedicated lane, fewer stops and quicker boarding would run on or close to Florida and Nebraska avenues before turning down Fowler Avenue. All three are state roads, which is part of the reason why the Florida Department of Transportation is interested in supporting the route.

'This study is 100 percent funded by (the state),' County Commissioner and transit board member Kimberly Overman said. 'And it gives us some opportunity to provide some feedback in the process.' Some board members expressed concern that the

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parameters of the study did not go far enough down Fowler Avenue to tap into all potential riders.

'There's many, many people who come from the east part of town, not just South Tampa and they all feed into USF,' said transit board member Gil Schisler, who also sits on the Temple Terrace City Council. 'I still think it's going to cost us money in the long run, and we're going to have to do another study to take care of everyone else.' Other board members, including Overman and County

Commissioner Pat Kemp, agreed that the scope could be wider but said the study was a good starting point.

'We do not want to give money back to FDOT because we will never get the opportunity again,' County Commissioner and transit board chair Les Miller said. 'This will move on to some place else: Orlando or Orange County or Miami, or wherever it may be.' Bus rapid transit is a relatively new concept for Tampa Bay, which previously fixated on the battle to bring light rail to the region. The dedicated bus lanes are popular in other parts of the country and the world for their ability to spur development and ridership without the costs and infrastructure associated with rail.

Tampa Bay is poised to get its first glimpse of the transit option in Pinellas, where a proposed 11-mile route would link downtown St. Petersburg with the beaches. The \$41 million project has been praised by many in the area for progressing so far in the federal grant application process, but also has faced pushback from the city of St. Pete Beach.

Another much longer rapid transit line linking Pasco, Hillsborough and Pinellas counties has been floated as a regional transit option connecting major activity hubs in Tampa Bay. Officials are still studying the potential 41-mile route, which would likely run in a combination of dedicated lanes, highway shoulders and mixed traffic.

The study the Hillsborough transit agency approved Monday would be more similar to the Central Avenue Bus Rapid Transit line in Pinellas. Each focuses on connecting two activity centers along similar-length corridors with already high transit ridership.

'We know the ridership is there for that corridor,' state modal development administrator Ming Gao said. 'If they can find a way to run the route in its own lane, even for part of it, it will provide more reliability in that system.' The state grant allows the transit agency to start pursuing what could be a very long process of trying to land federal dollars for the Tampa bus rapid transit line.

The transit agency is set to more than double its \$80 million budget with an influx of \$130 million a year in revenue from a transportation sales tax that Hillsborough voters passed in November. But the agency is hesitant to spend that money until a lawsuit intending to overturn the tax plays out in court.

'Even though HART is not in the position to spend any of the referendum dollars at this point, you need to start the process to get them in the pipeline for federal dollars,' Gao said. 'It takes a lot of time to go through that process.' Both Gao and transit board members cautioned that the authorizing of a study does not mean a

bus rapid transit line in Tampa is a sure thing. Officials could choose to pursue a 'no build' option once the study results come back.

'This isn't some sort of foregone conclusion,' transit board member John Melendez said. '(Bus rapid transit) is in my check box of transit alternatives, but I wanted to make that clear the no-build alternative is an option.' Jane Castor, the newly elected Tampa mayor, attended her first transit board meeting Monday but did not contribute to the bus rapid transit conversation. However, she said she decided to join the transit board in light of the referendum, which is set to bring in a total of \$280 million annually.

'Transportation was one of the pillars of my campaign,' the mayor said in a statement. 'And with the increased funding from All for Transportation, we are at a pivotal point for laying the groundwork and executing on what Tampa's next chapter looks like.'

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