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Without mass transit, Tampa Bay businesses, economy may face slow death

By Robert Trigaux, Times Business Columnist

In just a few months, the first step of what will become the most powerful economic boost to the Tampa Bay region in more than a generation will be voted upon. If you don't know what I'm talking about, shame on you.

That boost is the initial green light to funding Tampa Bay's proposed regional mass transit system - light rail, expanded bus service and road improvements. The first plunge is the Nov. 2 referendum by Hillsborough County voters to approve a penny tax increase to pay for the system within the county. Pinellas, Pasco and adjacent counties will then follow with referendums of their own, mass transit advocates hope, to slowly assemble one, new regional mass transportation system.

This is no overnight event. The process of planning, politics, financing, lobbying, educating, designing, building (and yes, fixing) and operating a system of this magnitude will take many years. Leadership, accountability, quality control and patience will be crucial. And even then, the outcries of inadequacy are inevitable.

The bad news is Tampa Bay is the last of the nation's largest 35 metro areas to operate a regional mass transit system. In an intensely competitive world, that lack of transportation options and mobility is quickly making Tampa Bay an economic has-been and, increasingly, a place ruled out by progressive businesses looking to expand or relocate.

The good news is this time around, Tampa Bay seems to have a terrific shot at making regional mass transit happen. And, as a silver lining, by being last among the biggest metro regions, we have the chance to pick and choose what works best among other mass transit systems. That may help us avoid the worst of the pitfalls.

If this column seems pro-mass transit, well, you're paying attention. Yes, seeking a new tax to raise money for mass transportation in this awful economy seems like terrible timing, and a few antitax voices are squawking about it.

But we are way past such narrow thinking. If Tampa Bay does not embrace a quality mass transit system, the area is doomed to wrestle with a traffic flow expected to triple within 25 years and to pay for road improvements that will never keep up with demand.

Consider: Handling additional traffic on Interstate 275 between downtown Tampa and New Tampa by 2035 will force expansion of that stretch of highway to 16 lanes at the cost of \$2 billion. Running light rail the same distance is expected to cost less than \$1 billion.

But that's just the micro view. Tampa Bay is embroiled in a far larger effort for its future. That includes smart growth planning known as One Bay to accommodate a doubling of the regional population by 2050 or so. It includes serious talks with Orlando about how to become a cohesive Central Florida "super region" linked by the now-approved, federally funded (so far) high-speed rail link between Tampa and Orlando. And it includes a rethinking of economic development to stress higher-density living in walk-to-work-and-play clusters near mass transit stations, reduce traditional sprawl and preserve more natural land.

Leaving Tampa Bay as is, without quality regional mass transit, is effectively a death sentence to its business community.

In the coming years with rising population, no major corporation will think twice of entering or expanding in a metro area that cannot offer its workers a mass transit option to get to and from work or, for that matter, to get to and from entertainment and shopping or even the beaches.

The effective blacklisting of Tampa Bay by growing companies means this region will face less job growth and inferior job opportunities. That translates to lower wages (as if they were not too low already), falling living standards, lower housing demand, less funding for our already challenged public education and leaner public services.

You get the idea. It's an ugly spiral.

None of this harrowing scenario has escaped the imaginations of the strongest advocates of regional mass transit. Over a Maggiano's chopped salad lunch last week, Tampa Mayor Pam Iorio and Tampa attorney Jim Davis, former congressman turned mass transit fan, argued convincingly that winning approval for a penny tax to fund a regional transportation of light rail, significantly expanded bus service and major road improvements is Job One. And they, in turn, expect Hillsborough's peer counties, especially Pinellas, to be prepared to deliver when it's their turn to fight for transportation funding.

It's no fluke that Iorio, whose term limit as mayor ends next spring, is fixated on getting mass transit under way. She recognizes how critical it is to Tampa, the county and the region - not to mention its relevance in connecting to the separately funded, already approved rail line between Orlando and Tampa.

Iorio is adamant that Tampa's next mayor continue to make mass transit a priority. She's already spent time with St. Petersburg Mayor Bill Foster, urging his support and gauging his motivation on rail. Foster's leadership, Iorio insists, is a linchpin to making things happen in Pinellas mass transit.

Foster was traveling Friday and could not offer his insights. But St. Petersburg transportation director Joe Kubicki says the mayor strongly supports a regional transit plan and Hillsborough's current funding effort. "This will influence the character of the entire region," he adds.

What's striking in the quest for regional mass transportation is the depth and range of its support.

"I think it will improve our quality of life," says Bev Griffiths, who chairs the Tampa Bay Sierra Club. She delivers the standard environmental pitch that more public transportation means fewer cars and less pollution, but that's only one argument of many she makes. Metro areas with strong mass transit will be the places that attract businesses, she says. "And we need to do a better job of attracting business to our area," she adds.

That's music to the ears of Jennifer Doerfel, executive vice president of the Tampa Bay Builders Association. She's delighted to be on the same side as the Sierra Club on such an issue, even as she offers a whole different take on why mass transit is critical.

Building is a cyclical industry - not that she needs to remind us in this housing downturn - but government got in the habit of funding roads and infrastructure from impact fees paid by private industry. Now there's

little building and - guess what? - no money from anyone for roads. That dependence on private industry is "not sustainable," says Doerfel, and damaging to communities.

For example, Doerfel lives in the Valrico area and suffers the stress of driving one of Tampa Bay's most overwhelmed roads: Lithia Pinecrest. That is one of the roadways that would first get attention if the penny tax for the mass transit system is approved by Hillsborough voters on Nov. 2.

Most of the attention on the mass transit package has been on the novelty of light rail. But 25 percent of the funds raised by the penny tax will be devoted to road improvements. And it is the impact of expanded bus service in the county, not light rail (which will take years to build), that will first be felt by residents and businesses.

"We should have done this (regional mass transit) a long time ago," says Doerfel, a 33-year-old Tampa Bay native. "We have lost out on a ton of opportunities."

Holland & Knight lawyer David Singer is director of the political and pro-mass transit group Moving Hillsborough Forward, which has received contributions in \$50,000 chunks or so totaling about \$1 million from the likes of TECO Energy, law firms and even the Tampa Bay Rays and Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

On Friday, I asked Singer: On a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being fully supportive), where is the business community on a regional mass transportation project of this magnitude?

His answer: 9.5. "I think the business community knows we need to invest in ourselves. And this project is a powerful generator of opportunity." The cost of doing nothing, he argues, means facing "astronomical costs" to build and expand our roads.

That's a message that must spread regionally and be sustained. I hope we have the leadership to make it happen.

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