

Pasco needs mass transit, planner says

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LAND O'LAKES — It probably won't happen for years, but Pasco commuters could eventually be able to take light rail and express buses to jobs in Hillsborough and Pinellas.

As residents continue to sit in traffic and curse the gridlock, a regional transportation group created by the state Legislature is crafting a master mass transit plan to take us 25, and then 40 years, into the future.

"Traffic in our area is getting worse and worse by the day," said senior planner Brian Bollas, a representative of the Tampa Bay Area Regional Transportation Authority, also known as TBARTA. The agency serves seven counties, from Citrus to Sarasota. Bollas is among the speakers dispatched to area civic groups to explain the need for expanding mass transit across regional lines.

On Thursday night, he brought the group's message and a PowerPoint presentation to the Pasco Alliance of Community Associations, a nonprofit network of community development districts and homeowner=2 0and condominium associations based in central Pasco. The group meets monthly at the Land O'Lakes Community Center on U.S. 41.

If nothing is done, he said, most of Tampa Bay area roads will be classified as failed roads.

"You might be sitting at the same red light four and five times," Bollas said.

Tampa Bay area residents spend a greater share of their incomes on transportation compared with other cities.

Detroit and the Tampa Bay area were recently cited as the only two among the nation's Top 25 cities with no rail system. However, since that information was released, Detroit began working on a rail system, leaving Tampa Bay standing alone.

"I think that kind of speaks volumes about our area," Bollas said.

A draft of a plan for 2035 shows Pasco being served by light rail in the Wesley Chapel area, and express buses traveling on State Road 54 and the Suncoast Parkway.

A draft of a master plan for 2050 shows 135 miles of short-distance rail, 107 miles for long-distance rail, 42 miles of bus transit in mixed traffic, 216 miles of express buses driving in managed lanes and 191 miles of other express bus service.

Bollas said those systems would work along with local bus services already in place.

A final draft is expected to be rolled out this summer.

No one knows for sure how such a system would be paid for, but Bollas expects it to come from20a mix of federal, state and local money.

He likens it to the interstate highway system put in place a half-century ago that was derided by critics as impractical or too far off in the future.

"I don't think any of us could possibly imagine the country without an interstate system," he said.

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Fast facts

Learn more

For more information about TBARTA and the draft master plan, visit www.tbarta.com or call (813) 217-4048.

For more information about the Pasco Alliance of Community Associations, visit www.MyPACA.org or call president Bill Parsons at (813) 991-6003.