

News: News Feature

The transit tax: 20 questions, or everything you need to know about the Hillsborough sales tax proposal

By Mitch Perry

Published 10.14.2010

<http://tampa.creativeloafing.com/gyrobase>

[/the_transit_tax_20_questions_or_everything_you_need_to_know_about_the_hillsborough_sales_tax_proposal/Content?oid=1266302](http://tampa.creativeloafing.com/gyrobase/the_transit_tax_20_questions_or_everything_you_need_to_know_about_the_hillsborough_sales_tax_proposal/Content?oid=1266302)



On November 2, Hillsborough County voters will be asked to support a penny increase in the county sales tax (from 7 to 8 percent) to help fund a new transit plan that would include the beginnings of a light rail system. Such a system in Hillsborough could ultimately lead to a transit network that encompasses the entire Tampa Bay region.

But there are lots of questions surrounding the proposal — and, for that matter, anything with the word "rail" in it.

So we thought it would be a good time to allay some of the confusion.

1. Would all the money from the tax go to light rail?

Nope — not even half. The tax would also pay for bus service and road improvements for motorists, pedestrians and, in some cases, cyclists. Light rail would get 43% of the funds, buses 32% and roads 25% of the projected \$230 million that would come in annually.

2. Do we know where the first light-rail route is going to go?

Not yet. HART is focusing primarily on two corridors — one running from downtown through the West Shore area to Tampa International Airport, and the other running from downtown up through the USF region and ending in New Tampa.

3. Wait, I could have sworn I read that rail is not going to the airport. I'm confused.

You're thinking of high-speed rail, not light rail. There's definitely a lot of confusion in the air about the two. Here's the distinction: Light rail — and the tax increase supporting such a system — is what Hillsborough voters will decide on next month. High-speed rail between Tampa and Orlando has already been granted initial funding by a federal stimulus grant of \$1.25 billion, with construction set to begin on the first link early

next year. In that plan, there will be one stop in Tampa, to be built next to the Marion Street Transit Center, with a stop in Lakeland, and three in the Orlando region. Despite calls by local elected officials, there is no plan at this time to go anywhere else, be it Tampa International or St. Pete. Again, that's high-speed rail, which is not on the ballot.

4. When will HART make a decision about the first light-rail route?

HART may announce it at their meeting on October 18, but there's also a chance that they won't get to it until after the November election. Essentially one of the corridors would run on or near I-275, one wouldn't. There have been some concerns that building the transit line on the freeway would be less amenable to transit-oriented development, but officials say that isn't necessarily the case.

5. Isn't that a problem, that we're voting for a plan for which we don't even know the specifics yet?

Proponents say that that there *are* specific plans in place for bus and roads projects. They say the fact that HART has not yet selected the initial light rail link is not a problem because it's simply the first of many routes in the county and perhaps the region, and it's not crucial to know the location of the first one up front.

6. That "transit-oriented development" you mentioned — what is it? And do we really need it?

Transit-oriented development refers to the new construction — corporate offices, condos, restaurants, retail — that is likely to sprout in the vicinity of transit stops. A lot of folks think the last thing Tampa and Hillsborough County needs is more development, but advocates believe such development will enhance business and thus the economy.

7. Well, do we really need light rail?

Well, how about the simple fact that our transportation generally blows? Seriously, earlier this year Forbes ranked the 60th biggest metro areas in the country when it comes to transportation, and Tampa/St. Petersburg/Clearwater came in dead last. Upon hearing about that dubious distinction, County Commissioner Mark Sharpe said, "Case closed." The population in Hillsborough County is expected to increase 73 percent by 2035. City and county officials say the level of public transportation services must be increased to keep up with that growth.

8. I assume we'll get jobs out of this. Anybody know how many?

HART has projected nearly 25,000 "new or sustained" jobs for the transit portion of the plan, from 2011 to 2035. They say they'll need more bus and paratransit operators, mechanics, maintenance technicians, contractors, customer service staff, administrative support and technology professionals to begin delivering the additional miles of new transit service. In addition, an undetermined number of jobs (construction, retail, etc.) could arise from transit-oriented development.

9. Most economists say it's never good to raise taxes in a recession. So why can't we wait?

Advocates acknowledge that it ain't easy to ask for people to vote to raise their taxes, but say we're already behind in comparison to regions of similar size in proposing such transportation measures.

10. I've heard that the business community supports the proposal, which is weird, since aren't they generally against all taxes?

Like other business communities nationwide, Tampa Bay's has been very active in supporting the rail initiative. The Tampa Bay Partnership has been one of the lead agencies supporting it, and the Chamber of Commerce and Tampa Bay Builders Association, TECO and the Tampa Bay Rays and Buccaneers are all

buying into the plan, big-time. Why? They believe that with the rising population, major corporations will never think of locating or expanding in the region without a viable mass transit option for people to get to and from work.

11. Who is against the proposal?

There are some who like the idea, but just can't support a tax in this economic climate. Anti-tax advocates call the project a boondoggle. Locally the Tampa 9.12 Project, a Tea Party offshoot, has been prominent in its opposition, as has most of the Hillsborough Republican party establishment. Nationally, anti-rail members of the Libertarian Cato Institute have spoken out against it as well.

12. Would the increase apply to everything I buy in Hillsborough?

No. The surtax would not apply to groceries or medicine, and would be capped on the first \$5,000 for large purchases.

13. When does the tax end?

It doesn't.

14. I don't trust the politicians to administer this fund properly. Who's going to mind the store?

An independent 11-member committee of experts and citizens will oversee how the tax dollars are spent. Hillsborough County, HART and Tampa will appoint three members each, Temple Terrace and Plant City one each. They will come from the governmental, finance, accounting, auditing and transportation engineering fields in both the private and public sectors.

15. Well, how much is this going to cost me?

The Hillsborough Metropolitan Organization says the tax will cost the average family \$12 a month, or \$144 a year. It will cost the average single person \$85 a year.

16. I've heard that light rail always needs to be subsidized and doesn't pay for itself.

Transportation never pays for itself. *Roads* don't pay for themselves.

17. A member of the Heritage Foundation says that light-rail transit "doesn't serve any place well except downtown." True?

David Singer of Moving Hillsborough Forward, the advocacy group formed to pass the transit tax, says that the light rail system is going to generate 46 miles of service in Hillsborough County. So geographically, it's physically impossible that it will only serve downtown.

18. What about cost overruns? Critics contend that's what we're seeing already in places that rail boosters crow about, like Phoenix and Charlotte.

This is one instance where Tampa's distressed economy is a good thing, says MHF's David Singer, because construction costs are lower than they have been. "When we sign our contracts, and send out bids," he says, "we can actually build the system at a lower cost than say, in Charlotte, did in 2005 and 2006, when prices were very high."

19. If the measure loses, will supporters of rail in Hillsborough bring it back in 2012?

You don't hear much about the possibility of losing on the campaign trail, because who wants to talk about a measure in the past tense before it's been voted on? In fact, similar proposals have faced initial defeat in communities across the country before being proposed and passing a second time around.

20. This is a Hillsborough tax. What's up in Pinellas? Will light rail ever link Tampa and St. Pete?

Over the course of this year, a Transportation Task Force headed by Pinellas County Commissioner Karen Seel has been meeting monthly, studying the county's plans for light rail. Depending on what happens in Hillsborough, a proposal to put a tax referendum on the ballot in Pinellas might happen in 2012.

info

The rail world

- **Light Rail:** Multiple trains of electric rail cars operating primarily at surface level either over exclusive rights-of way or over public streets. Generally requires the acquisition or dedication of new rights-of-way and the construction of new tracks. Light rail would be part of the Hillsborough County transit system funded by the sales tax increase.

- **High-Speed Rail:** High-speed rail requires the use of either an improved existing railway alignment or a new alignment that includes very gentle horizontal and vertical curvatures as well as few, if any, grade crossings. High-speed intercity trains may be envisioned as operating at maximum speeds of anywhere from 125 to 250 miles per hour. Federal stimulus funds are already in place for the first link in a high-speed rail line between Tampa and Orlando, which is due to begin construction early next year.

- **Commuter Rail:** Passenger train transit service that utilizes diesel-electric or electrically propelled trains, operating over existing railway tracks on the same rights-of-way used by intercity railway freight and passenger trains. Commuter rail currently exists in South Florida (Tri-Rail) and is being contemplated in Orlando. There are no plans to create commuter rail lines in Tampa Bay.

Definitions from the Minnesota Department of Transportation and trainweb.org.

More:

[Click here to read our rail interview with Mayor Iorio](#)

©1996-2010 Creative Loafing Media - All Rights Reserved