



## Fact, fiction fly as Greenlight Pinellas transit debate hits stretch run

By Tony Fabrizio, Reporter

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Even if they only walk their ballots out to their mailboxes, Pinellas County residents will be doing some extra-heavy lifting in the Nov. 4 election.

Besides deciding on a governor, medical marijuana and local representatives like everyone else, Pinellas voters will say yea or nay to Greenlight Pinellas, one of the most polarizing referendums in county history.

The mega mass transit plan includes a controversial 24-mile light rail line from downtown Clearwater to downtown St. Petersburg and a gradual but substantial expansion of the Pinellas County Transit Authority bus service. It would cost \$2.2 billion to build and \$130 million a year to operate, and those are only starting numbers.

Since federal (including TIFIA loans) and state money will only go so far, voters are being asked to approve a 1-cent sales tax that would generate \$130 million a year for the PSTA rather than the current \$30 million from a property tax. The hike would give Pinellas the highest tax rate in the state at 8 percent, and while the property tax levy would disappear, non-property owners would see no tradeoff.

Is Greenlight good for everyone? Backers paint a romantic and rosy picture of walkable communities, burgeoning urban development along the train line and soaring property values.

They point to Pinellas having the highest population density in Florida and the Tampa Bay area being the largest metropolis in the country without “robust” mass transit. Current transit, they

argue, doesn't offer enough routes or hours to offer true mobility and isn't a magnet for young workers who want to live in a city where they don't have to rely on a car.

Opponents cite near empty buses on many routes, say PSTA can't be trusted with such a large budget and practically scream about the train, claiming it would serve relatively few, take almost no cars off the road and could saddle future generations with heavy debt and maintenance costs.

They note that only 1.6 percent of Pinellas residents take public transit to work, citing U.S. Census figures, and argue that it's ludicrous to think people are suddenly going to give up their cars to walk in the Florida heat, humidity and rain to and from a transit station.

"The other question on the census was, 'how long does it take you to get to work?' " said Barb Haselden, campaign manager for the anti-Greenlight group No Tax for Tracks. "The answer in 2010 was 23 minutes. So when you have less than 2 percent of the people relying on public transportation for work and a 23-minute drive to get there, we don't have much of a problem."

### **Many prominent backers**

Yet, Greenlight Pinellas has been endorsed by 16 Pinellas cities and municipalities, the Pinellas County Commission, and the St. Petersburg Chamber of Commerce. Mayors Rick Kriseman of St. Pete and George Cretekos are big backers, as is Tampa mayor Bob Buckhorn, who sees Greenlight as a potential precursor to a region-wide system.

What's more, Greenlight campaign donations have poured in from Tampa Bay's three major pro sports franchises and a variety of businesses, including Duke Energy, which of course might benefit from powering the electric trains.

Foes are unduly focused on the rail component of the plan, Greenlight backers say. Expanded bus service and Rapid Bus Transit, in which buses would travel in an express lane in the median or on a shoulder, would extend through the county.

"It's critical that you have a much better bus service to go along with the rail," said Kyle Parks, a spokesman for the pro-transit Friends of Greenlight. "There's no better system to get a lot of people to one place at a time than rail. At the same time, we want everybody in the county to have a robust system. The opposition has said the answer to having a better bus system is to have six routes. We don't feel like that's an answer for a true county-wide system."

Pinellas leaders took a sizeable risk by including rail in the plan because of its \$1.6 billion price tag, but they say it seemed the thing to do after completing a two-year study of alternative transit required to apply for federal funds.

More than 30 metropolitan areas have rail, including comparable markets such as Charlotte, Phoenix, and Portland, so why not Tampa Bay? Orlando, with comparable transit ridership to Pinellas/Hillsborough, recently opened the first phase of SunRail, a \$1.2 billion commuter rail system that will eventually run more than 60 miles through four counties.

## **Light rail: Does it make sense?**

The Pinellas train would shuttle riders to and from the Gateway area, one of Tampa Bay's biggest employment centers, and would have 16 stops between St. Petersburg and Clearwater. It would travel along or in the median of East Bay Drive, Roosevelt Boulevard, Haines Road and I-275, but planners otherwise have few specifics.

The line would not be operational until 2024 at the earliest.

Among those who've blasted the plan is noted light rail hater Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow at the libertarian think tank the Cato Institute. Cato wrote in August the Pinellas rail line "would be so costly and attract so few new riders that it would be less expensive to give every new round-trip commuter who was attracted to the light rail a new Toyota Prius every single year for 30 years than to build the light rail."

A study commissioned by Hillsborough County government seems to support that conclusion, arguing that Hillsborough, which has higher transit ridership than Pinellas, has "significant room for ridership growth in the HART (bus) service before an investment in (light rail) would be viable."

"The vast majority of new rail projects implemented over the past decades have occurred in communities where existing transit ridership levels are significantly higher than those currently observed in Hillsborough County," the report from the consulting firm AECOM said in May.

Polls show Greenlight trailing, but with many voters apparently undecided and the stretch run still ahead, the vote could go either way. Friends of Greenlight has raised more than \$800,000 for its campaign and is omnipresent with TV ads, billboards and signs. The grassroots No Tax for Tracks group doesn't have much money, but it packs the powerful punch of an anti-tax sentiment.

Each side accuses the others of myths and misinformation, and in presentations and debates around the county, they back up their claims with dueling facts, figures and anecdotal evidence.

"The opposition says people aren't riding the bus," said Friends of Greenlights' Parks. "On the core routes of the PSTA system, ridership is 11 people at a time on the bus, which matches national averages. That tells you that with a better system, more weekend hours, more hours into the evening, it's going to be better for people who are, like, trying to get to class at (St. Pete College), where they can't get a ride home, and people working a second shift."

Haseldon, the No Tax for Tracks campaign manager, said she recently traveled to Denver and rode the city's new FasTracks light rail line from the western suburbs at 11 a.m. on Friday and found both the train and the park-and-ride lot nearly empty. She pulls photos out of a folder to offer evidence.

She also noted that since Denver voters approved an 0.4 percent sales tax to fund the \$4.7 billion FasTracks plan in 2004, the projected cost for the eventual 122-mile system has risen to \$7.4 billion.

### **Property owners pay the least**

The Greenlight combatants also disagree on the fairness of the 1-cent sales tax, with Friends of Greenlight emphasizing that a third will be paid by visitors and No Tax for Tracks calling it a tax break for the wealthy on the backs of people who don't own property.

Chris Steinocher, president of the St. Pete Chamber of Commerce, says the tax poor won't really be hurt because there's no tax in Florida on groceries and prescriptions. He says Greenlight could be a boon for those who simply give up their cars, or at least their second car.

"On average, it takes about \$7,500 to \$10,000 to own and maintain a car," he said. "If you take that money out of the system and allow a person to use mass transit, that's money they can invest in their home."

Voters have a lot to consider, and among the alarms that should go off in their minds, Heselden says, is that the PSTA would be in charge of Greenlight.

The PSTA hasn't proven it can be a good steward of public funds, she says, pointing to CEO Brad Miller recently having to return \$354,000 of anti-terrorism grant money to the Department of Homeland Security because the PSTA improperly used it to promote itself and Greenlight.

"I don't see the competence in this organization to manage this kind of a project," she said. "And the truth is, the people such as Mr. Miller who are spearheading this project are going to be gone, and we will be left here holding the bag with who knows who."

Voters who haven't done so already have a month to make up their own minds.