



Group tries to derail transit plans

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CLEARWATER – Opponents of light rail sharply criticized the transit service at a forum April 29, saying that there are more efficient and less expensive ways to resolve traffic gridlock.

The purpose of the forum at the Feather Sound Country Club was “shedding light on light rail and the tax increase to pay for it,” a flier said.

The South Pinellas 912 brought in speakers who took issue with light rail and other transit projects in other areas, citing poor ridership, large construction and maintenance costs and heavy federal government subsidies.

Barbara Haselden, South Pinellas 912 organizer, said her group took a map and identified seven hubs full of businesses along the proposed Pinellas County rail route in mid-April. They went door to door to get their opinions on rail.

“These were the people that were on the exact route ... And we wanted to find out if they were happy about that and essentially, no one had heard of the rail plans.”

“One in 31 supported the rail when we told them of the plans or 2.5 percent. Again, we went to 279 businesses. Most business owners were very upset,” Haselden said.

Randal O’Toole, an author and an analyst of growth, land and transportation issues and a senior fellow for the Cato Institute, berated transit operations in Portland, Ore., his hometown

“They have subsidized light rail to the tune of \$4 billion in counting,” he said. “The costs are going up and they are spending more and more on each new rail line as it comes out.”

The area has a commuter train that costs 60 percent more than they expected it to cost. Ridership is very low, he said.

Portland’s first transit line cost \$15 million a mile. The second cost \$55 million a mile, O’Toole said.

“They are building one now that costs \$205 million a mile,” he said.

Asked why the light rail systems are so popular in Europe, he said the average American rides rail transit 96 miles a year. The average European rides rails transit 108 miles a year.

"They have four times as many trains yet they only ride it 10 percent more than we do," O'Toole said

Ed Braddy, a former Gainesville city commissioner who is now the executive director of the American Dream Coalition, said leaders have to be convinced to look to the future.

"The most just maddening thing is this routine claim that rail transit is the future. Folks, it's the past," Braddy said.

He recommended the use of one-way street conversions and hot lanes with high occupancy tolling among other mobility tools.

"You can build your way out of congestion," he said. "Maryland's intercounty connector is electronic tolling so you don't have to stop. It has reduced by half the daily commute. ... Just across the bay you have the Selmon Crosstown Expressway – reversible lanes, electronic tolling, financed 100 percent with user fees. It's elevated in the medians so there wasn't eminent domain," Brady said.

State Rep. Jeff Brandes, R-St. Petersburg, via Skype, also said he was working to stop light rail in Pinellas County and encouraged the organization to stay involved. He called it "a boondoggle program."

Haselden said the county's bus system is headed for insolvency in the next few years.

In an email, PSTA spokesman Bob Lasher disputed the contention.

"PSTA is in no way heading toward 'insolvency,'" he said.

He said PSTA developed a plan that provides the agency several years of time while it uses new revenues from four different types of fare adjustments over the past three years, draws down on its reserves, takes advantage of substantially increased advertising revenue, saves resources through competitive contracting for higher-cost paratransit services and maintains a reduced level of bus routes, which were previously cut by about 8 percent.

"This time is needed to develop PSTA's longer term plans including identification of a sustainable set of revenues," Lasher said. "We will, as we always have every year, develop a balanced budget each year and will not become insolvent."

Opponents of light rail have spoken out against proposals to raise the sales tax by 1 cent to finance Pinellas transit improvements, including several people at the meeting who had signs saying "no tax for trax" on their vehicles.

At this point, the sales tax is under consideration along with other funding sources. In recent months officials have talked about a 50 percent local funding commitment financed over 30 years. They are looking for federal, state and public-private

partnerships to pay the remaining balance of the project.

Regarding Braddy's remarks that rail transit is the way of the past, Lasher said "around the U.S., when coupled with strong supporting bus networks, city after city take advantage of modern rail transit's ability to efficiently carry high numbers of residents, tourists, and workers throughout their communities. Pinellas County's future will be tied to transportation solutions that can accommodate efficient, sustainable growth where there is almost no room for additional roads or low density development."

"What could be better for the future of a county – where there is almost no room for additional roads – than a modern, enhanced transit system that cuts pollution, cuts our dependence on foreign oil, encourages economic development and gives us the freedom of not needing a car when we want to go somewhere? That is an appropriate question for the citizens of Pinellas County to consider," he said.

He also said that Pinellas has little room for new roads, whether they be toll lanes or typical taxpayer funded roads.

County officials emphasize that though a preferred route for rail has been selected, they are in the early stages of the project.

The cost of the proposed Pinellas County project, which includes 24 miles of light rail, 16 stations, the right of way and structures, is \$1.5 billion to \$1.7 billion, consultants have said.

Basically, the proposed rail line follows the CSX corridor between Clearwater and Largo and continues along East Bay Drive with a connection to the Clearwater-St. Petersburg Airport. It runs along Roosevelt Boulevard and Ulmerton Road, connecting to the Gateway area, Pinellas Park and downtown St. Petersburg. It also includes a regional connection across Tampa Bay.

Haselden said her group members have attended meetings county officials have held pertaining to transit planning. Officials were invited to the meeting at Feather Sound. Among the officials in attendance were county Commissioners Nancy Bostock, Norm Roche and Neil Brickfield and Largo City Commissioner Curtis Holmes.

Asked why no official from agencies involved in Pinellas transit planning was asked to make a presentation, Haselden said the organization has heard the agencies' position on transit and now South Pinellas 912 wants to present its side. She said the group spent a lot of time and money to bring in national speakers who have experience with transit in areas that Pinellas officials have made reference to in its discussions.