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Separating fact from fantasy: Tampa Bay's economy will suffer without strong mass transit

By Robert Trigaux

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Whether approved or defeated by county voters next month, the Greenlight Pinellas mass transit plan that promises more robust bus service and a 24-mile light rail line from Clearwater to St. Petersburg won't go away. Ultimately, a regional mass transit system, whether kick-started first in Pinellas or in neighboring Hillsborough County, is going to happen.

The key question is how far behind other metro areas — how less competitive — does the Tampa Bay regional economy want to become until viable mass transit arrives?

We all get it. Mass transit systems are expensive and controversial. Their early years often can be awash in learning mistakes, from construction cost overruns and operating losses to property disputes over rail lines and even the occasional political scandal.

The goal, of course, is to avoid or minimize such negatives. But come on, folks, let's stop being the last big metro area to take the mass transit plunge. Let's join the 21st century.

Complaining about an initial rail line in Pinellas is like the critics of old panning the first and only telephone line strung between two cities. It's just a beginning.

Overwhelmingly, metro areas that commit to a single light rail line end up building a bigger system. Of 28 U.S. metro areas that have sought to expand their existing system, 27 have voted to do so, Art Guzzetti, policy vice president at the American Public Transportation Association, said in an interview at the Tampa Bay Times.

"You want to get started," he said. "Then you will have the underpinning of a system to build upon."

In the long run, if Tampa Bay can't get it together on an effective mass transit system, its economy will be outdistanced by the likes of Orlando, Atlanta, Charlotte, Denver, San Diego and any of dozens of other metro areas. These cities boast the leadership and economic desire to embrace a more efficient way to move lots of people around a large, multi-county region.

Many of those like-sized metro areas already out-muscle Tampa Bay with better paying jobs and more robust economic output. It's not only because these areas have superior transportation, many with light rail and better bus systems. But there's no question — it's already making a difference.

"This area must understand that mass transit is long term and very expensive," corporate scout and former Largo resident Larry Gigerich of the site selection firm Ginovus, told area business and political leaders last month in Tampa.

"But it will pay off."

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At first glance, the political and business battle to win the votes to approve Greenlight Pinellas seems almost unfair. At a regional transit conference last week, the mayors of St. Petersburg, Clearwater, Tampa and Lakeland (Polk County has its own mass transit referendum this fall) all forcefully urged passage of the Pinellas referendum of the 1-cent sales tax to fund the Greenlight Pinellas plan.

Pinellas County elected officials, from Commissioner Ken Welch to influential state Republican Sen. Jack Latvala, have thrown their voices behind the plan. "Frankly, if we're going to be a major-league county, we need to have some sort of better mass transit," Latvala said.

Funding in support of Greenlight Pinellas dwarfs the opposition. Recent numbers indicate the pro-Greenlight movement has raised more than \$775,000 through August. Contrast that to the \$46,000 and change collected by the anti-Greenlight, Tea Party-flavored group No Tax for Tracks.

This is the organization whose leader has suggested Pinellas' bus windows are tinted to hide the lack of passengers. Funny. I thought — like Florida cars — windows are tinted to help deflect the intense heat from the sun.

A related group known as Ax the Tax paid \$500 to Cato Institute libertarian think tank contrarian Randal O'Toole to write a report criticizing the light rail portion of Greenlight Pinellas as a loser — like other light rail systems in the country that somehow keep expanding. This is the same anti-mass transit guy who, last month in Minneapolis remarks against a new rail line to St. Paul, called planners the "Ebola of urban living."

My favorite part of O'Toole's hatchet job in St. Petersburg last month was his suggestion that people sharing driverless cars will render mass transit "superfluous" as people "simply call for a self driving car to come to their door."

Really? That's O'Toole's cost effective alternative? Won't driverless cars become just as "superfluous" when Captain Kirk knocks on our doors to "beam us up" to our next destinations?

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One clear message is that mass transit done right can help drive regional economic development.

Veteran site selector Dennis Donovan's corporate clients include about a third of the Fortune 500 companies. He told a Tampa audience last month that large metro areas that lack the means for young, highly skilled people to commute longer distances easily to their jobs will increasingly be passed over by companies in favor of cities with stronger mass transit options.

"Lots of headquarter companies are looking for Millennial talent," said Donovan. "You really do need to pass this (Greenlight) initiative."

It's not just creative talent that benefits. Beach resorts say they endorse Greenlight Pinellas because a strong bus system will make it easier for more hotel and restaurant workers to commute to the beaches, where parking is at a premium, and leave their cars behind.

Even area sports teams are jumping on mass transit. The Tampa Bay Rays, Tampa Bay Buccaneers and Tampa Bay Lightning have ponied up \$25,000 apiece for Greenlight Pinellas.

While the Bucs and Lightning call Tampa home, their investing in Pinellas mass transit is not simple charity. They recognize mass transit as a key to filling stadium and arena seats in the future.

Should Greenlight Pinellas win voter approval in November, Hillsborough County and Tampa are poised to press ahead on their own mass transit referendum, probably in 2016. The city and county were first to push a similar referendum in 2010, only to see it voted down at the peak of an oppressive recession.

What happens if Greenlight Pinellas fails to pass next month? The regional clock starts anew. Both Pinellas and Hillsborough mass transit efforts will rethink the timing of referendums.

But new referendums there will be.