

## FORWARD PINELLAS

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June 17, 2020

David Green, Executive Director  
Tampa Bay Area Regional Transit Authority  
4350 West Cypress Street, Suite 700  
Tampa, FL 33607

### **RE: Envision 2030 Regional Transit Development Plan**

Dear David –

Planning, developing, and funding the transit network in the Tampa Bay region is a necessarily collaborative process. It takes different partners working together to overcome decades of missed opportunities, false starts, siloed responsibilities, and unfulfilled expectations. Transit agencies depend on strong partnerships with the federal, state, and local government for financial assistance and complementary land development activities. Regional support is also critical. The role of metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) is essential for transit projects to receive federal and state funding by establishing transportation spending priorities and ensuring a well-connected multimodal network is in place to support transit investments.

Serving on TBARTA's Transit Advisory Group as a staff representative of the West Central Florida MPO Chairs Coordinating Committee (CCC), I offer the following comments on behalf of the six MPOs in the region.

The Envision 2030 Regional TDP is a thorough, well-organized planning document that builds upon prior plans to define a series of transit improvements to better connect our rapidly growing region. The plan recognizes a regional transit role in supporting economic opportunity, access to education and health care, and fostering a cleaner environment. TBARTA has an important, evolving role to play in an expanded regional transit network that uses traditional and new forms of mobility to connect with local transit services in each county, the foundation of the Tampa Bay area's public transportation network.

More importantly, Envision 2030 advances the important conversation in our growing region about transportation funding, particularly by examining alternatives to the transit status quo. Transit is an underrated, undervalued, and underfunded part of how we connect people to places. That situation makes each transit agency protective of the limited funding streams that sustain existing operations. We understand that TBARTA is prepared to adopt the "Status Quo" financial scenario for the Regional TDP, but that is not a sustainable strategy for TBARTA or any of the public transportation providers in Tampa Bay. For instance, the annual legislative earmarks to TBARTA harm existing transit agencies because those funds are re-allocated from current projects; it isn't new money into the system.

The MPOs in the region emphatically support expanding the region's public transportation network. Doing that requires a commitment to growing the share of transportation funding that goes to worthy transit projects and recognizing the tremendous unmet capital and operating needs of current operators primarily serving each county. We encourage TBARTA to join us in the mission to grow the funding "pie" for transit rather than cut it into smaller slices. Some examples where we could work together include the topic of eligibility for programs like the Strategic Intermodal System (SIS) and other FDOT funding categories, as well as the use of toll revenues collected on the region's highways. We believe funds should be allocated to the best solution among all modes of transportation, and that state spending priorities should be re-evaluated in urban areas where regional transit authorities like TBARTA and cooperative metropolitan planning processes like the CCC exist to clearly define priorities. Legislative action may be needed in some cases, and TBARTA's participation in a regional advocacy coalition would be very welcome.

The Tampa Bay Partnership's 2019 [Regional Economic Competitiveness Report](#) illustrates that a lack of transit access to employment opportunities is a critical weakness that holds down household incomes in the Tampa Bay region. Particularly for lower income households and people of color, poorly funded and inaccessible public transportation hinders economic opportunity. To illustrate, the [Pinellas County Equity Profile](#) published in 2019 documented more than \$3 billion lost to the county's economy due to racial economic disparities. A lack of transportation options is a key factor. Underfunded and nonexistent transit service – at both the local and regional levels – is a significant equity issue for the entire region.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced everyone to adapt. The next 12-18 months will reveal how profound those impacts will be in the longer term to the office, retail, agriculture, tourism and transit markets, and which responses will be successful. The MPO staff directors encourage the TBARTA board to take a truly collaborative approach to work in partnership with local, regional and state organizations to find viable, long-term solutions to transit funding in Tampa Bay.

Please let me know if you have questions or would like to discuss these comments further. Thank you for your consideration, ongoing collaboration, and leadership.

Sincerely,



Whit Blanton, FAICP  
Executive Director

Enclosure

cc: Beth Alden, AICP, Hillsborough MPO  
Ronnie Blackshear, Pasco MPO  
Dave Hutchinson, Sarasota/Manatee MPO  
Steve Diez, Citrus-Hernando MPO  
Chandra Frederick, AICP, Polk TPO  
Justin Hall, Florida Department of Transportation District 7  
Wayne Gaither, Florida Department of Transportation District 1