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- News
- Places
- Focus
- Companies
- Speakers
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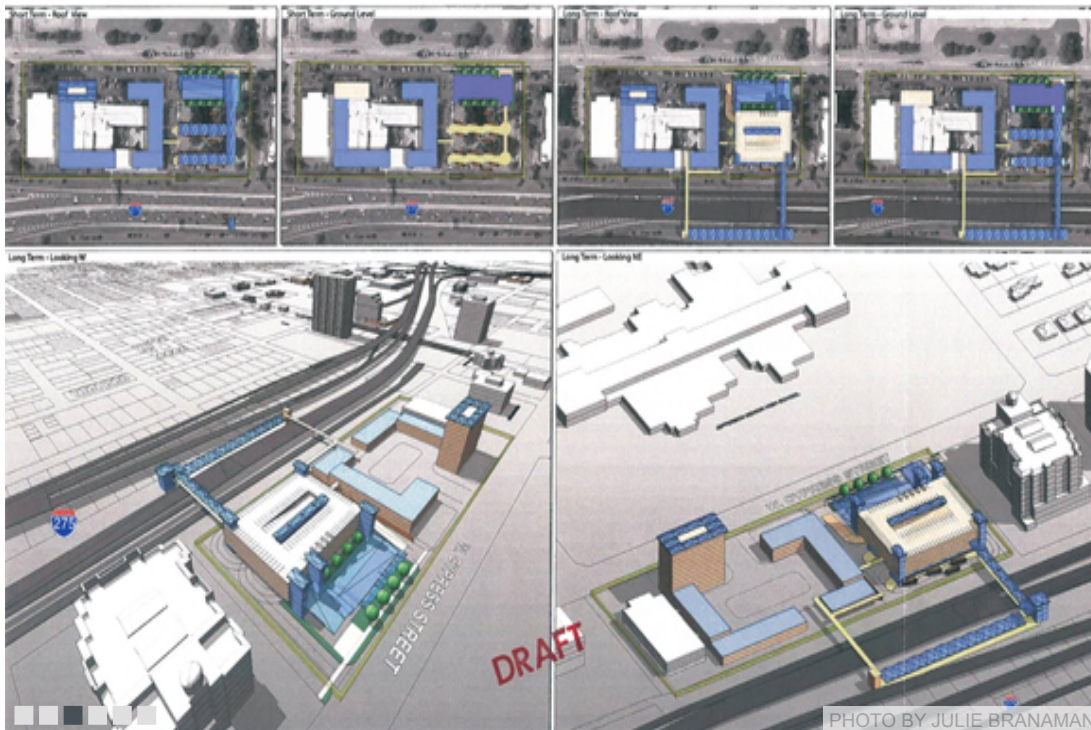
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Visionaries see Westshore transit hub as connector to city's future

JOSHUA MCMORROW-HERNANDEZ | TUESDAY, JANUARY 26, 2016




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The Westshore transit hub in Tampa could soon offer a whole new world of transportation possibilities to locals and tourists looking for alternatives to driving cars around congested Bay area roads.

If state planners and local urban designers have their way, drivers could soon park their cars in the heart of the Westshore district and take express buses to work in St. Petersburg, zip into downtown Tampa by rail or hop aboard neighborhood trolleys for fun shopping or dining excursions.

Travelers from afar arriving at Tampa International Airport (TIA) might be able to walk off their planes and right onto a people mover that would take them to the transit hub two miles away. From there, they could hop aboard a bus, train, trolley, or perhaps even jump into a rickshaw, for a quick and convenient trip to the Tampa Bay area's many landmarks and destinations.

The transit hub, which will be located across from Jefferson High School, could also help teens get to school on time without their parents having to drive them halfway across town in rush hour traffic. Meanwhile, new homes, restaurants and shops are sure to spring up around the transit hub, contributing to the vibrancy of the evolving Westshore community.

Tampa architect Mickey Jacob sees the intermodal transit hub as just one component of many that need to be considered in improving the city's transit network.

"It's like winning the lottery," Jacob says. "It takes six numbers to win; the transit hub is one of those numbers so that Tampa can win the transit lottery." He thinks the Westshore transit hub is a major stride forward for the Tampa Bay area.

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“Every journey begins with the first step.”

For the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT), that first step began with the purchase of the DoubleTree Hilton Hotel and Charley's Steak House at 4500 West Cypress Street. Both the hotel and restaurant, which were built in the mid 1970s, will continue leasing the site on Cypress Street through 2017 and possibly longer. The state paid \$45 million for the centrally located Cypress Street property, bordered to the south by Interstate 275, Trask Street to the west, and Manhattan Avenue to the east.

While many of the details about the intermodal hub are still dreams on the drawing board, FDOT spokesperson Kris Carson says premium transit options such as rail and express bus routes “could be served by the transit hub.” She adds, “we foresee a possible public-private partnership with the hub, with potential for restaurants, shops, and grocery.”

What else does the intermodal transit hub provide for the future of the Westshore area and the greater Tampa Bay area? Many longtime residents and leaders of local organizations are already forming opinions on what construction of the transit hub will mean for the larger community.

Westshore thought leaders see hub as catalyst for change

Randy Coen, President of Coen & Company, a transportation and land use consulting firm, has lived in the Westshore area since 1979. However, he began working in the neighborhood in 1972, a time when the late pioneering Tampa developer Al Austin was turning Westshore into one of Florida's most popular business districts.

“Since the 1970s, Westshore has transformed from an office market with a mall and some supportive hotel, retail and restaurant uses to a truly mixed-use environment with two malls, numerous hotels, restaurants and many residential



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Through a focus on transit and technology, the Tampa Innovation Alliance aims to help change the narrative about the entire Tampa Bay region. The idea is to engage students, startup businesses and community connections and collaborations in a combined effort.

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options,” Coen says.

“The Westshore multimodal facility is a very significant step in providing opportunities for the development of multimodal options in Westshore. I look forward to the day when it’s not unusual for folks who live or work in Westshore to leave their cars behind and walk from place to place here.”

Ann Kulig, Executive Director of the [Westshore Alliance](#), sees the transit hub as a key catalyst not only in reshaping how people get around the community, but also in redefining the type of development Westshore may see in the years ahead.

“It figures centrally in a slow-moving process of transit and transit-oriented development,” Kulig says. “I [also] think what it does is lay the groundwork for future development. The other thing the transit hub does is it feeds into the redevelopment of the Interstate 275/State Road 60 interchange,” a project that the FDOT is planning.

Ultimately, Kulig hopes the transit hub also inspires more discussion about using and improving all forms of transit in Westshore. “Now that the site has been settled, we can look at how we can get further circulation in the [Westshore] district. That doesn’t just mean buses and trains, but also rental cars, bikes and other modes of transportation.”

She points to non-office growth in the Westshore region as one reason that transportation improvements are becoming increasingly important for the neighborhood.

“In the year 2000, there were only 2,000 apartments and condos in the Westshore area, and now we have around 6,000. Most of that growth has come just in the past seven or eight years.”

More growth could certainly follow once the transit hub is built, as has happened

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in other cities that have recently initiated plans for similar intermodal transit hubs. Kulig believes the potential public-private partnerships the FDOT is discussing for the transit hub could further “open people’s eyes on developing and redeveloping around [that] property.”

Philip Smith’s eyes have been focused on Westshore development for years. As president of [Framework Group, LLC](#), he currently oversees the construction of two apartment projects in Westshore, with 350 units under development at 1701 North Lois Avenue and 262 units going up at 4310 West Spruce Street -- all within a few blocks of the proposed transit hub.

“I was interested in developing there because of proximity to jobs, shopping, restaurants and services,” he says. “[The transit hub] is a critical step in addressing the long-term transportation challenges of the region. Fully realized, it will have a very positive impact by providing a variety of transportation options to link the airport, the Westshore business district, downtown and the larger region with a number of choices including bus rapid transit and light rail.”

Tanya Arja, spokesperson for the [Hillsborough County School District](#), says the construction of the mass transit hub directly across from Jefferson High School is a good thing for the educational facility and for students across Hillsborough County.

“We see the transit hub as a positive. Anytime you add transit options to the county, it can only be a good thing,” she says. “It could ease transit for students who are coming and going to the school, and also assist children and their parents during after-school activities. ... It’s going to support the school. At Jefferson, we have many students involved in after-school sports and other activities, and they and their parents could use the transit options available right across the street to get around.”

Local historian expresses doubts

Jefferson High alum Mario Núñez, who is executive producer and host of The Tampa Natives Show on local cable television, graduated from Jefferson High School in 1976.

“I love that school and all its tradition and history,” he says.

Jefferson High School was originally founded as a junior high school in 1928 at the Old Hillsborough County High School building at 2704 N. Highland Avenue and became a high school in 1939; the historical institution was closed in 1967 when the school board determined the school did not meet modern educational requirements and was subsequently relocated to Westshore in 1973.

“If this multimodal center goes in right across the street from the a fully functioning high school, how can that possibly be a good thing? Imagine going to high school across the street from the Greyhound bus terminal -- that’s a disaster waiting to happen for a myriad of reasons.”

Despite his reservations, Núñez has positive things to say about the concept of the intermodal transit center and its potential, though he still pushes for its construction elsewhere in the Westshore community.

“It could work as long as it’s connected to a much larger network of buses, trains, cabs, Uber, limos, etc. and it’s placed in an area – perhaps out by [TIA] – where you’re not disrupting the environment around an established high school.”

His nostalgia extends beyond his old school – he’s mournful about the demise of the Doubletree Inn and Charley’s restaurant structures that the intermodal hub is slated to replace.

“I saw those two buildings being built and later found myself employed by the Holiday Inn Airport (as it was then known) and Fanny’s Restaurant – before that,

Fanny's was Mr. R's Place – the precursor to the legendary Tampa nightclub The Great Doctor Robiconti's Miracle Elixir and Music Emporium, better known as Robiconti's," he relates. He says the former Holiday Inn, where he served as a bell captain, reserved a quarter of its rooms for flight crews to stay in during their overnight layovers. "I would go on from there to become a professional flight attendant, enjoy a 30-year run and ultimately retire from that very rewarding travel industry career. I credit that hotel with giving me my start – I have very fond memories of my time there."

HART to play big role In Westshore Intermodal Transit Hub

While locals express a range of emotions about the project, and long-range goals for rail and premium transit options exist merely in blueprints, at least one thing is for certain: the presence of Hillsborough Area Regional Transit (HART) Authority buses at the Westshore intermodal hub.

"We've been involved with [the] DOT from the beginning of this concept," says HART spokesperson Sandra Morrison. "Previous plans included rail stations at the airport (in the rail alternatives analysis) and a transit center near the airport, and we as a region have been looking for a hub where we can tie together local rails, regional routes, and service around the area. Currently, we hub at WestShore Plaza, and having a dedicated location would help us with customer convenience and faster service," she says.

"We plan to consolidate bus and shuttle transfers to the new location. This will enable us to get out of the mall parking lots and provide more direct service, which will be faster and save resources," Morrison remarks. "This will also allow us to connect to routes from Pinellas, which currently run nonstop to downtown Tampa, and will let us tie in with alternative providers like Zipcar. We continue to work with DOT as they plan ultimate facility design."

Mickey Jacob of BDG Architects in Tampa, may be one of the locals who helps

design the intermodal transit hub. Not only did Jacob serve as American Institute of Architects president in 2012-13, but he is also a member of the HART board.

“If you look at the downtown Tampa skyline in 1979 and compare it to what it looks like today, you’ll see how much has changed in our city in 35 years,” says the architect, who has lived in Tampa since the early 1980s. “The city continues to evolve and I’m really excited about the things that we have happening here from the urban design standpoint. There is really a lot of positive stuff happening here, and when you throw in the transit hub, it’s a lynchpin to really getting a true transit system here in Tampa.”

Jacob sees two opportunities emerging as efforts to improve Tampa’s transit network are underway.

“One,” he says, “is our streetcar system in downtown. We can improve it and make it a system for getting people around the urban core.” He continues, “the second opportunity is [in utilizing] the network of [railroad] tracks in this community to get people around. CSX has already expressed interest in supporting this.”

He believes the existing network of rails could help make implementing rail transit in Tampa an affordable reality. “How do we use existing rails to create a rail system? We don’t necessarily need to spend lots of money when we already have infrastructure in place.”

No matter what modes of transit eventually serve commuters and tourists at the transit center, Jacob says he believes there is at least one objective that must be met. “Our challenge is to look at ways to most effectively instill transit opportunities with current infrastructure and integrate that with the HART network. The question is, how do we make it more attractive to impact people and the lifestyles they lead?”



Read more articles by [Joshua McMorrow-Hernandez](#).

Joshua McMorrow-Hernandez is a feature writer for 83 Degrees Media in the Tampa Bay region of Florida.

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