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The Essentiality Of Planning For Future Transit
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Very few errors made in the world of municipal management are so costly and bitterly regretted as poor planning or no planning.

One need only drive the length of South Dale Mabry Highway and observe the countless curb cuts, all-but-nonexistent setbacks and architectural chaos to ask the question: How the devil could they have let it happen?

Dale Mabry, of course, is not exceptional. In cities large and small throughout the nation, there is evidence enough of old, undisciplined development that stands all but uncorrectable - absent a mighty expensive effort to renovate centrally important thoroughfares, as the French did in Paris in the late 1800s. But doing it right the first time is better.

No Mystery About It

Land-use planning should be partnered with transportation planning. The future holds many uncertainties, but one of them is not the continued growth of Florida's population. And much of that growth will occur in Hillsborough County, because there still remains plenty of room to build plenty of stuff.

If people would or could stay in one place, we wouldn't need to think about how they will get from here to there 20 years hence. But almost everybody steps out the door each day and goes somewhere, and that behavior can be accommodated until the many become too many. Then motor vehicles multiply at a rate that defeats the best the road builders can do.

Which is what has happened in many jurisdictions, including Dallas-Fort Worth, neighboring cities that bow to no other in local esteem for great highways, speedy cars and muscle trucks. But as far back as 1982, planners realized the answer lay beyond miles of more highway lanes.

As C. Mac Sebree reports in Trains magazine: ``Though they knew this day of reckoning was a long way off, they had to act fast or lose a transit corridor

between the two cities to abandonment, the former Rock Island main line. The line cost \$34 million to purchase (and it would take another \$254 million to put trains on it)."

A comparison of Hillsborough County or even the greater Tampa Bay area with Dallas-Fort Worth in terms of transportation needs makes sense.

Daunting Obstacles

In 20 years the need for commuter rail will be as intense here as it is now in that large Texas metropolitan region. And even though that region planned well ahead for the coming of rapid transit, it faced daunting obstacles.

Writes Sebree: ``[The Trinity Railway Express, named for the nearby Trinity River] had to jump through hoops to reach downtown Fort Worth. First, the line had to dive under the BNSF tracks, then tunnel through the ground floor of the historic Alarm Supply Building."

Daily ridership on the 34-mile service is now 7,000, well above projections, and planners are talking about a 300-mile system that will fan out in all directions. The Trinity Railway Express is successful because highway commuters can't be sure when they'll arrive at work. The trains, on the other hand, keep to a reliable schedule.

But in truth, Dallas-Fort Worth should have begun planning for rail long before 1982. In a fast-growing area, thickening traffic is a given. Hillsborough County's government and the planning commission may not have the means to do what they should be doing right now, but they might develop a consensus about transit planning for the day when tens of thousands of additional motor vehicles are on our main arteries and no one will be able to move.

This story can be found at:

<http://www.tampatrib.com/News/columns/MGAPGQWM67D.html>