

Connecting Florida

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FOR DECADES, THE MAJOR metropolitan areas in Florida have operated independently and with strikingly different agendas, reflecting differences in business climate and culture. But there are signs that may be changing, prompted in part by new efforts to improve transit options in the state and helped along by Florida's ULI district councils. The efforts come none too soon in a state where auto traffic is getting worse by the day and public transportation options are limited.

ULI saw an opportunity to engage the district councils for Northeast Florida, Tampa Bay, Central Florida, Southwest Florida, and Southeast Florida/Caribbean to analyze the links between transportation and land use around the state. The result was a collaborative effort called Connecting Florida that illustrates both the progress and challenges involved in planning improvements to Florida's transportation system.

Connecting Florida is supported by the ULI/Curtis Regional Infrastructure Project. "I believe a large part of the quality and competitiveness of our future relates to the following questions: How do we live and work? Where do we live and work? How do we move goods and services? And how do we move people?" says Jim Curtis, managing partner of the San Francisco-based Bristol Group and a ULI trustee, who provided the funding for the project.

ULI leaders are using the Connecting Florida initiative, including a special report released in April, *Connecting Florida: Transit + Florida's Economy*, to help leaders get answers to some of these questions and to ensure that the organization plays a larger role in the transportation dialogue.

An effort such as Connecting Florida still needs a spark to ignite. This spark came from Debbie Orshefsky, chair of ULI Southeast Florida/Carib-

bean, who initiated an infrastructure committee that secured the Curtis Project grant, bringing together all five district councils in Florida. "This effort marks a major step forward in having our district councils work together," says Carla Coleman, executive director of ULI Southeast Florida/Caribbean. "I think it's a sign that Florida's cities can find common ground and the power of cooperation to work together on big issues, and it's great that ULI is helping to make that happen."

Connecting Florida also coincides with a new level of awareness statewide of the need for better transit options. For example, when business and civic leaders realized that supporting the existing Tri-Rail service in southeast Florida would benefit the plans for SunRail in Orlando and eventually lead to progress on rail plans in Tampa Bay, attitudes started to change about the need for different areas of the state to work together.

Miami's Metromover is free to riders. Florida's historic vote in support of commuter rail service in southeastern and central Florida was a significant step toward regionally integrated transit systems.



MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

The *Connecting Florida* report describes the transportation progress made by each of the state's metro areas, which involves everything from buses to light rail. The progress varies dramatically.

For instance, in Boca Raton, a new retail center, Village Plaza, has opened, offering coffee or a workout at a fitness center within walking distance of southeast Florida's Tri-Rail commuter-rail line, the state's first regional transit system. It is one of the state's first significant examples of transit-oriented development (TOD). Several other TOD projects are in the planning stages in southeast Florida, and the area is now working on an extension of its Metrorail system, which will connect Miami International Airport with the city.

In the Tampa Bay area, district council leaders are using the *Connecting Florida* report as part of ongoing presentations on how better transit options contribute to more well-defined development patterns and the overall quality of life in communities. And in southwest Florida, several new projects are underway that show a heightened interest in TOD.

In the Jacksonville area, plans are underway to develop transit options for the region, where auto traffic will

A separate traffic lane is reserved for the LYMMO circulator bus in downtown Orlando.

someday be more challenging than it is today. "We want to be ahead of the curve," says Michael Blaylock, CEO of the Jacksonville Transportation Authority and a member of the advisory board for ULI North Florida. "If we build a transportation model that leads to less sprawl and easier commutes, it improves everyone's quality of life. Getting everyone in the state on the same page is what efforts like this report will help to accomplish."

A planned high-speed rail system only heightens the need for creation of light-rail and bus systems in the areas it will serve—Tampa Bay, Orlando, and eventually south Florida. The 84 miles (135 km) of new high-speed track between Tampa and Orlando is being partially funded by a \$1.25 billion federal grant and promises to offer 16 round-trips per day on trains reaching speeds of up to 168 miles per hour (270 kmph).

In central Florida, a commuter-rail transit project called SunRail will run along a 61-mile (98-km) stretch of existing freight track in Orange,



METROPLAN ORLANDO

Seminole, Osceola, and Volusia counties. SunRail is scheduled to begin service in 2013. Metroplan Orlando, the metropolitan planning organization representing Orange, Osceola, and Seminole counties, shared the *Connecting Florida* report with its board to help members make timely, informed decisions on implementation of the transportation plan in their region as high-speed rail and commuter rail become reality.

"A top priority for us in central Florida is to optimize investments being made in rail transit," says Harold W. Barley, executive director of Metroplan Orlando. "ULI's work has been a tremendous help."

And in Tampa Bay, discussions center on the need for a variety of transportation options for commuters when they arrive by high-speed rail in Tampa. Initial efforts are

focused on that city, but the St. Petersburg–Clearwater area is also joining the discussion. ULI Tampa Bay has been working to help raise awareness, with a special committee making more than a dozen presentations to local civic and business groups about the economic advantages of TOD.

Indeed, the reality of high-speed rail is adding a sense of urgency to the need for figuring out how the service should fit into a larger transportation system, as well as expediting efforts to educate the public.

"These issues can be hard to get your arms around, but that only makes it more important for different parts of the state to work together," says Stuart Rogel, CEO of the Tampa Bay Partnership and chairman of the ULI Tampa Bay governance committee.

Rogel has long played a key role in working to bring Tampa and Orlando closer together on regional economic development initiatives. He was part of the ULI team that arranged for the first *Connecting Florida* product in fall 2009—a brochure describing what transit can do for economic development, accompanied by a cover letter signed by all five district council chairs—to be



BUTTERS CONSTRUCTION & DEVELOPMENT

Within walking distance of Tri-Rail's Boca Raton station is Village Plaza, a new retail center. Combining errands and access to the metropolitan region adds to the vitality and convenience of the area.