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Planning board wary of transit-funding bill

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A local transportation board continues to have reservations about a fledging regional transit authority.

The Sarasota-Manatee Metropolitan Organization had issues Monday with a bill that would fund the Tampa Bay Area Regional Transportation Authority, or TBARTA, by shifting some state revenues.

"All it's doing is taking money from one pot and putting it into another pot," said Joe McClash, a Manatee County commissioner and member of the MPO, which sets transportation priorities for the two-county area.

The bill, sponsored by Rep. Bill Galvano, R-Bradenton, would take 80 percent of what the state collects from a \$2-a-day rental-car surcharge and allocate the money to TBARTA and three other regional transit authorities. The money - \$71 million last year - now goes into the state's transportation trust fund.

That could mean an initial \$14.5 million a year for TBARTA, created last year to build toll roads, rail lines and bus routes in a seven-county region between Citrus and Sarasota counties.

But some MPO members said that seems to contradict previous pledges by Galvano, author of a bill that created the authority, that TBARTA would not siphon existing transportation money.

That's not the case, said Galvano, who was not at the MPO meeting. The bill would ensure that money collected locally will be spent locally, he said in a later interview.

"You're talking about funds that are going into the trust fund that are not earmarked for any particular projects," he said. "Now, money raised in Sarasota can be spent just about anywhere. . . . This (bill) would better target those revenues."

Galvano's bill cleared one state House committee last week and awaits action by two others. A similar Senate version also is in committee.

MPO members stressed they did not oppose funding TBARTA through new revenue sources, saying that's what the state should be doing.

"Why aren't they considering an extra dollar or two-dollar (rental-car) surcharge? Then it would be new money," said Manatee County Commissioner Carol Whitmore.

Galvano said he expects to hear from MPO members - who voted to send him a letter voicing their worries - when they travel to Tallahassee later this week.

"I will work with them," he said. "I'm sure there are ways to increase their confidence."

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