FutureStructure

Autonomous Shuttles May Be Coming to Downtown Tampa, Fla.

To cut down on accidents and keep traffic flowing smoothly, the Florida Department of Transportation is working on applications that would connect the automated cars of the future to each other and to infrastructure.

BY YVETTE C. HAMMETT, TAMPA TRIBUNE, FLA. / MARCH 14, 2016

A model of an autonomous shuttle.
SCREENSHOT/EASYMILE (HTTP://EASYMILE.COM/EXCITING-JOURNEY-TO-THE-FAIR-WITH-EZ10-CITY-OF-VANTAA-TV-CHANEL)

(TNS) -- Three decades from now, young downtown employees will expect access to affordable micro apartments that allow them to walk outside, grab coffee on the corner, then catch a modern streetcar to their offices.

After work, they might want to hit the gym, grab some groceries at the local market, then maybe order an automated car to get to happy hour. They can check their email while the driverless vehicle navigates the roadways.

Creating the downtown Tampa of the future is "a generational act of giving something to your kids and your children's kids," said Robert MacLeod, director of the University of South Florida's School of Architecture & Community Design.

That vision may bear little resemblance to today's downtown, but it will suit the needs of the future, MacLeod said, speaking at the 20th annual Downtown Development Forum held Friday at The Straz Center for the Performing Arts. The event was sponsored by the Tampa Downtown Partnership.

Gone will be the days of traveling everywhere in a single occupancy vehicle, said architect Mickey Jacob.

"We have to start looking at that challenge. There are new and unique opportunities for us. We all know the issue. We are running out of parking, we have run out of parking downtown. Our challenge is how do we look at the development process with all of these cool things going on, making sure the option isn't the auto and figuring out a place to store it.

"We have to think big if we are going to compete worldwide," said Jacob, of BDG Architects. "It is about creating outdoor and public spaces that are so critical to the success of downtown. About creating a streetscape for automobiles, bikes, the streetcar, pedestrians. These are the standards we need to have to connect to downtown" and to connect with Tampa Bay Lightning owner Jeff Vinik's huge plan for redeveloping the arena district of the city.

Those designing the future should be looking to sustainable construction methods for a densely populated community that wants to live in a healthy environment, he said.

"We need to look at micro housing. If the young people I'm hiring have to live 25-30 miles away to work downtown, then we are failing as a city. A lot of them can't afford luxury apartments."

The office environment has to move forward, too, Jacob said, with a transit-oriented design and plenty of green space in between.

"Young people want to live in places that are cool and happening" and it is up to Tampa to provide that if it wants to compete, he said. "We need to dare to lead."

And leading the way in to the future requires a robust transit system to move people, said Hillsborough Area Regional Transit Authority CEO Katharine Eagan.

"We are ahead of this," she said, referring to various studies under way to build a regionwide transit system that can move people on buses, trains and vans. We have a wonderful program that is five- to 10 years away," but already, HART is funding new programs that can get people to and from bus stops and a fare system that will allow people to travel by bus in Hillsborough or other nearby counties using the same prepaid card.

Meanwhile, the Florida Department of Transportation is working on applications that would connect the automated cars of the future to each other and to infrastructure to cut down on accidents and keep traffic flowing smoothly, said Ming Gao, strategic intermodal systems coordinator for the DOT.

"It's coming," Gao said. "It is all moving quickly. There are lots of challenges."

When the DOT builds the new northbound span of the Howard Frankland Bridge it will be with that future technology in mind, Gao said. "And we're making the bridge a few feet wider to free up one lane for (express) buses and trucks."

Next up, Hillsborough County Administrator Mike Merrill, describing himself as "the waiter who shows up with the bill," talked about the need to fund so many of the road and transit upgrades needed now and into the future.

He took the opportunity to discuss Go Hillsborough, an initiative to collaborate with the public and the experts on what needs to be done, set priorities and find a way to pay for it all. A proposed plan to ask voters for a half-cent sales tax increase is the only proven answer, he said.

County commissioners and the mayors from Tampa, Plant City and Temple Terrace are expected to vote soon on whether to place that sales tax increase on the November ballot.

"We are 20-30 years behind our competition," Merrill said. "We are trying to compete in a Model T when they are driving Teslas. Time is not our friend at this point."

The county needs more transit options and more road options, he said. "A lot of premium transit will have to run on roads. And eventually we'll have to have managed lanes" for bus rapid transit.

"There is only one reliable, consistent revenue and that is a sales tax," Merrill said.

"If you live in this county and breathe and walk, you are part of the transportation system," he said. "The sales tax is a true countywide solution."

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