Transportation Focus Groups: Hillsborough County Residents March 2011

Presentation to Interagency Working Group April 8, 2011

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Research Objectives

Explore the community values around transportation, traffic congestion and impacts on quality of life.

Gauge the top-of-mind concerns about transportation, both locally and regionally.

Understand the transportation needs of county residents, and to review and ensure the cost feasibility of the 2035 LRTP

Understand the perceived benefits and liabilities of the transportation plan that voters rejected in the 2010 transportation referendum.

Assess willingness to pay for transportation improvements, via taxation and various sources. This includes levels of support for a scaled-down plan (e.g., a rail demonstration line).

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Qualitative Research

We cannot project or attribute findings to the general population of Hillsborough County.

Analysis of the language, perceptions and attitudes of these specific participants

Why they think the way they do? How they arrive at their positions?

Some findings may be worthy of follow-up quantitative research to assess the strength and breadth of opinions county-wide among a much broader population of Hillsborough County residents.

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Methodology

Groups convened from 8 sub-areas of Hillsborough County

Group 1: NW Hillsborough, including Carrollwood, Lutz-Keystone, and Citrus Park

Group 2: NE Hillsborough, including Temple Terrace and New Tampa

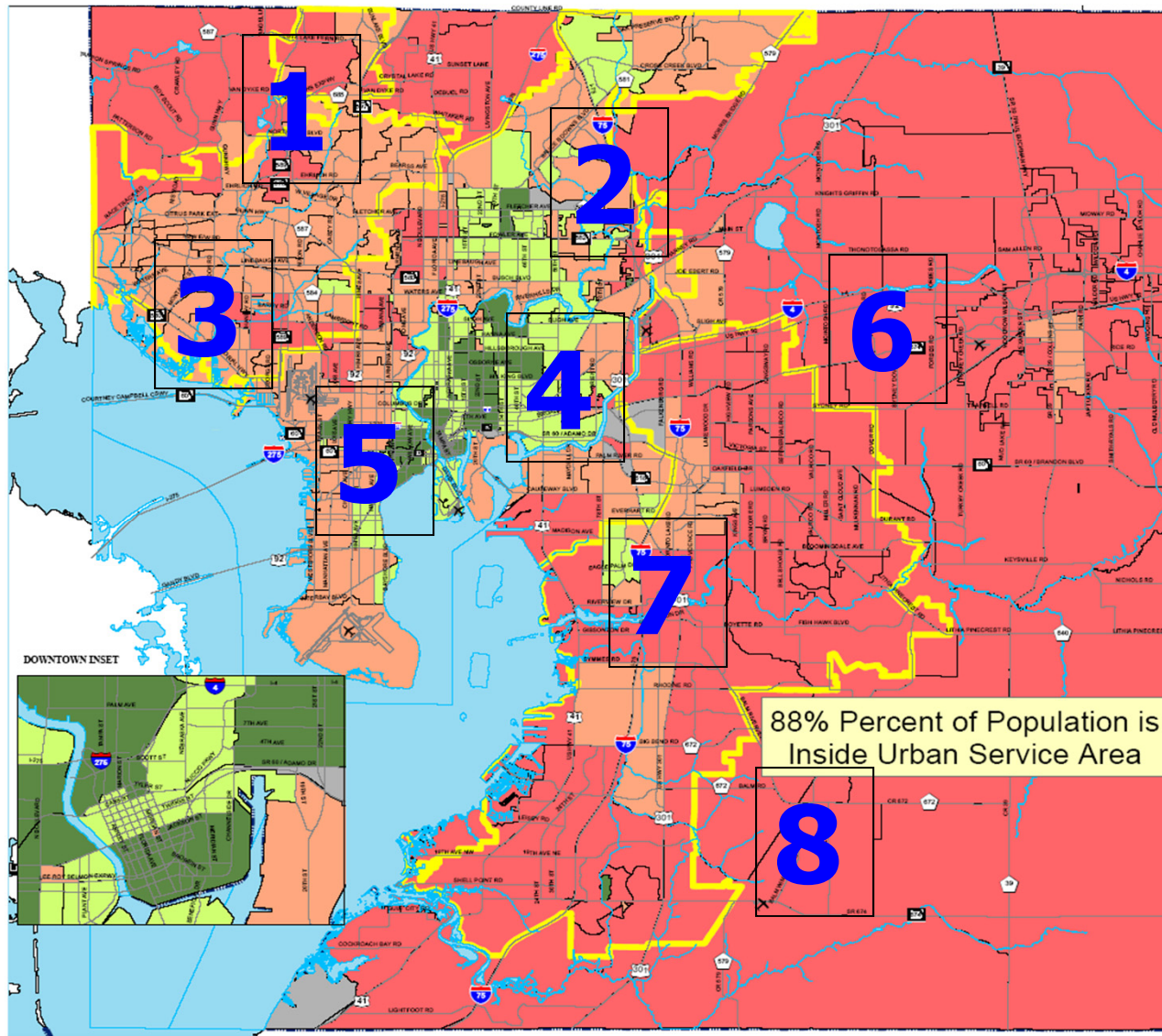**Group 3: Westchase, Town & Country, Egypt Lake**

Group 4: Central & East Tampa, including downtown

Group 5: South & West Tampa, including Westshore

Group 6: Eastern Hillsborough, including Plant City, Dover, Lithia and Fishhawk Ranch

Group 7: Greater Brandon area, Palm River and Mango

Group 8: South Shore, Apollo Beach, Ruskin, Sun City Center

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88% Percent of Population is Inside Urban Service Area

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Hillsborough County MPO – 2035 LRTP Re-Visit
Focus Groups 2011

Methodology

Focus Group participant profiles:

- **Active-status voters, recruited at random from voter database**

- **Mixed groups in gender, age, political party affiliation**
  - **Ages ranged from 20's to 70's**

- **Wide range of backgrounds, occupations, family status, life experience, transportation needs, commuting patterns, length of residency in Hillsborough County**

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Discussion Approach

- **Frame traffic & transportation as a "quality of life" issue**

- **Gather top-of-mind transportation concerns and issues**
  - **Local/parochial,** *and*
  - **Countywide**

- **Gather impressions and perceptions of planned improvements in 2035 LRTP <u>in their local area</u>: roadways and highways, transit, bike paths, pedestrian infrastructure**

- **Gather impressions and perceptions of planned <u>countywide</u> improvements in 2035 LRTP: transit**

(cont'd. . .)

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Discussion Approach

(cont'd. . .)

- **Re-visit the November 2010 Transportation Referendum**

  - **Did you vote? What was the proposal? How did you vote? Why did you vote the way you did?**

- **Discuss transportation needs, and what steps should be taken to make transportation better in Hillsborough County in the short-term and the long-term**

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Summary of Key Findings

Key Findings

Traffic congestion is viewed as a byproduct of a failure to plan ahead for transportation infrastructure.

- **A strong perception among focus group participants that commercial and residential development has been disconnected from its impact on roads and traffic.**

- **Common point of view is that transportation infrastructure has not kept up with growth – for decades.**

- **Local officials are in constant "catch-up" mode – and too often, the solutions are inadequate.**

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Key Findings

The most popular strategies to address traffic congestion were <u>primarily</u> targeted ideas to improve traffic flow on local roads.

Top-of-mind transportation issues were predominantly complaints about traffic snags in the "first mile" or "last mile" of a trip:

- **Timing traffic lights**
- **Lack of turn lanes**
- **Dangerous intersections**
- **Inadequate capacity on local roads and arterials**

Improving mass transit was also mentioned as part of the mix – but most often as a way to provide options, not to alleviate traffic congestion.

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"First-Mile"/"Last-Mile" Issues

"We need better coordinated lights."

"It's hard for me to get into school every day because of that light and not having a turn lane."

"Just add more left turn lanes."

"In Carrollwood, just to pull out of my neighborhood, there's so much oncoming traffic and the lights are timed so poorly, that there's not a gap and I can't get out."

"The light changes, two cars can go through, and then there's a line of 50 more cars, waiting. OK, I guess I'm going to be here another 25 minutes."

"Does anyone see Waters? Can someone fix the traffic lights, please?"

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Key Findings

Nearly universal point of view that their pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure is dismal and a safety risk.

A common theme in all 8 groups—urban, suburban, exurban and rural—was that riding a bike and walking are neither easy nor safe.

- **Lack of connections and contiguity**
- **Range of causes…**
  - **Urban design**
  - **Inconsistent implementation of paths, sidewalks**
  - **Disregard by drivers**

. . .This problem limits choices and options.

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Inadequate Pedestrian Infrastructure

"I'd like to be able to do more by walking. It's not very possible in the north part of Tampa."

"There's a beautiful trail near me but I have to cross Hillsborough Avenue to get to it, so I don't go."

"You get on a sidewalk and you walk for a while on a sidewalk and. . .then there's no sidewalk and you have to walk out into the street. It's dangerous."

"Walking in this area is dangerous, any hour of the day. To cross 60, you're taking your life in your hands."

Inadequate Bicycle Infrastructure

"There's a lot of problems with bike fatalities."

"They need to widen [bike lanes] so they can be seen because we've had too many bikers get killed."

"I like the improvements in the bikeway and trail projects because if I felt safe I wouldn't have a problem riding my bike places, because people can drive really viciously."

"I'd say Tampa is one of the more dangerous areas for bikes in the country."

"The bike lanes here, you'd be crazy to be on them."

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Key Findings

Common perception that the Tampa area and Hillsborough County is too sprawling, too car-centric, and too dispersed for mass transit to work.

The focus groups viewed transit as a basic public service, even though they were largely unfamiliar with the transit system in Hillsborough County.

However. . .

In talking about mass transit and whether it should be expanded and diversified (e.g., adding new modes), *a very common perception is that transit "just doesn't work here."*

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Hillsborough County: Made for Transit?
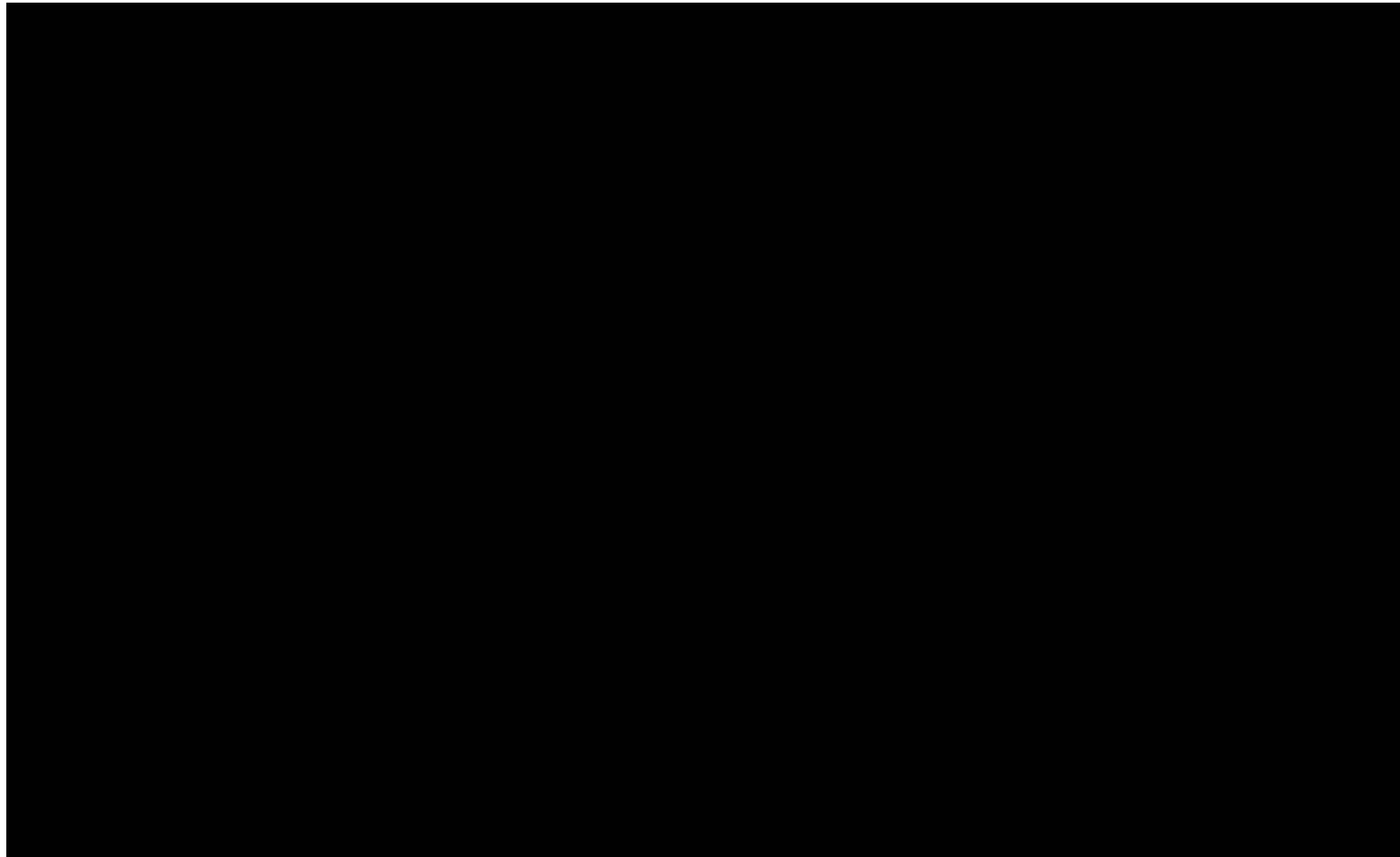
Key Findings

TALKING ABOUT TRANSIT. . .

The focus group discussions indicated some major perceptual barriers to expanding mass transit in Tampa and Hillsborough County:

- **Perception that the HART system is not effective.**

- **Confusion about and unfamiliarity with mass transit in general, especially rail modes.**

- **Not a strong perception that transit improves connectivity between point A to point B, or that it justifies the trade-offs (time, convenience, money).**

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Key Findings

Perception of the current bus system is neutral at best, negative at worst, and for many, there is not a baseline perception at all.

Overall, the focus groups' perceptions of HART centered on. . .
- **Not enough accessibility and routes**
- **Poor infrastructure, e.g. bus stops**
- **Limited hours of service**
- **Extensive transfers to get to destinations**
- **For drivers, the buses impede traffic flow**

- *And, importantly, a general lack of direct experience with HART or knowledge of how to use the system*

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HART and lack of transit familiarity

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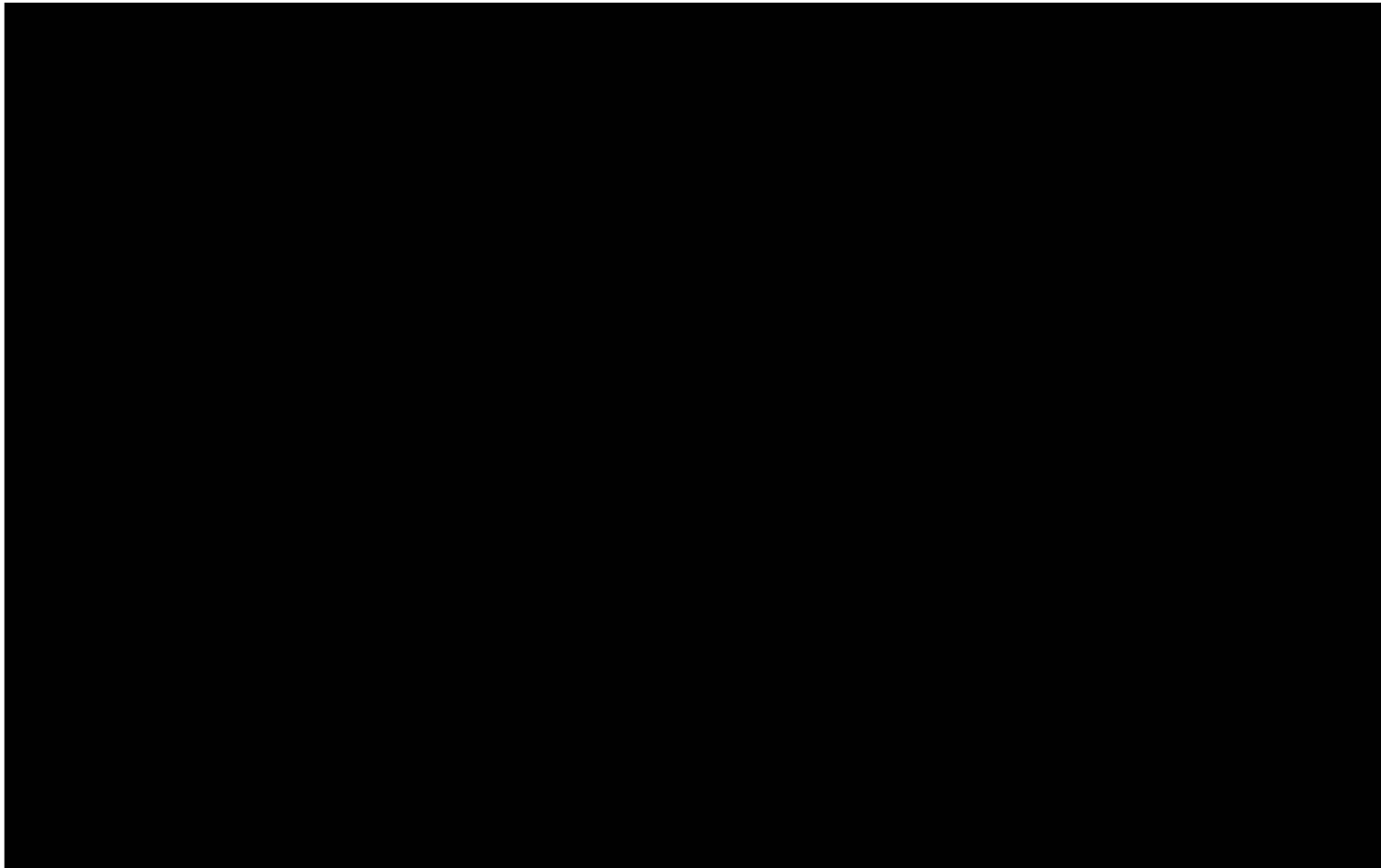
Key Findings

Focus group participants did not display a clear, accurate understanding of rail modes and how they function.

- **Not much "tactile" familiarity with rail transportation, other than using it in other cities.**
- **Confusion between light rail and the High Speed Rail to Orlando**
- **Very little grasp of important facts about rail modes:**

  - **Are we talking about a subway? Monorail? Commuter rail? Trolley?**
  - **What's the cost to ride? Where does it go? How does it connect?**

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Key Findings

A big hurdle to embracing mass transit is confusion about connectivity—i.e., "Even if I did take a train or bus, how do I get where I really want to go?"

- **Focus groups raised practical concerns: how does this get me where I need to go?**
  - **Where do I park my car?**
  - **Am I able to walk from my stop to my office/home?**
  - **Do I have to transfer from bus to rail or vice versa? And how many times?**
  - **Is it <u>really</u> more convenient?**

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How does the system connect?
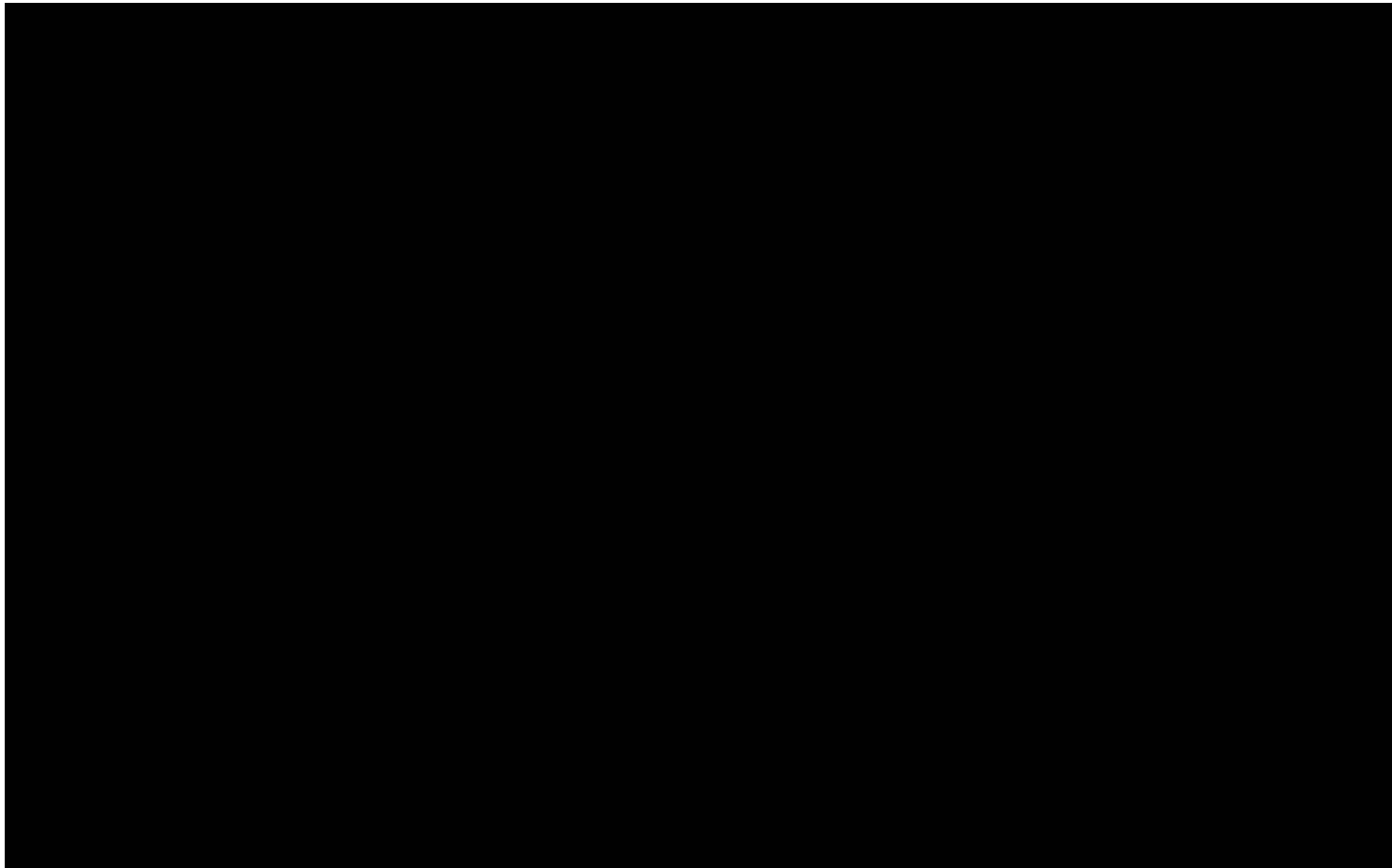
KEY FINDINGS

SOME KEY THEMES WE'VE HEARD SO FAR. . .

- Traffic congestion is a serious problem—but everyone develops their own coping strategies.

- The systematic solutions – which include mass transit – are wide-ranging in scale, and perceived to be elusive.

- There's deep confusion about transit – what it is, how it works, where it goes—and if it even "works" in Tampa and Hillsborough County.

- Lack of faith and confidence in government and public agencies at all levels (local, county, state, federal) to plan ahead, fix problems, make things better.

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Sidebar: 2010 Referendum

- **Overall, focus group participants only had a shallow awareness of the 2010 election and the Transportation Referendum.**

- **Major confusion about the ballot proposal: which tax source and how much; whether or not it included the Tampa-Orlando high speed rail line; and the basic components of the Referendum's transportation plan.**

- **Notably, participants revealed some fluid and shifting attitudes, in hindsight, on how they would vote again. . .**

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Sidebar: 2010 Referendum

Fluid and shifting attitudes in hindsight. . .

| Reconsider my "no" vote	Reconsider "yes" vote
◆**Economy gets better** ◆**Household returns to full employment** ◆**More improvements to hotspots in my "area"** ◆**Show me how it will work – convince me**	◆**Is sales tax the right tool?** ◆**Constructing <u>all of this</u> will be way too disruptive** ◆**It will take so long to implement** ◆**I don't see how I'd connect to this proposed system**

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Key Findings

Participants who were in favor of expanding mass transit were generally supportive of a more incremental approach.

- Expanding bus service is part of the solution, but a parallel path is establishing more positive attitudes and perceptions of the existing bus transit system.

- "Create familiarity" with rail with a demonstration line—but there are major cost and tax concerns.

- In the focus groups, the lack of specificity in expanding transit (costs, corridors, modes, timing) caused some hesitancy.

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Incremental approach
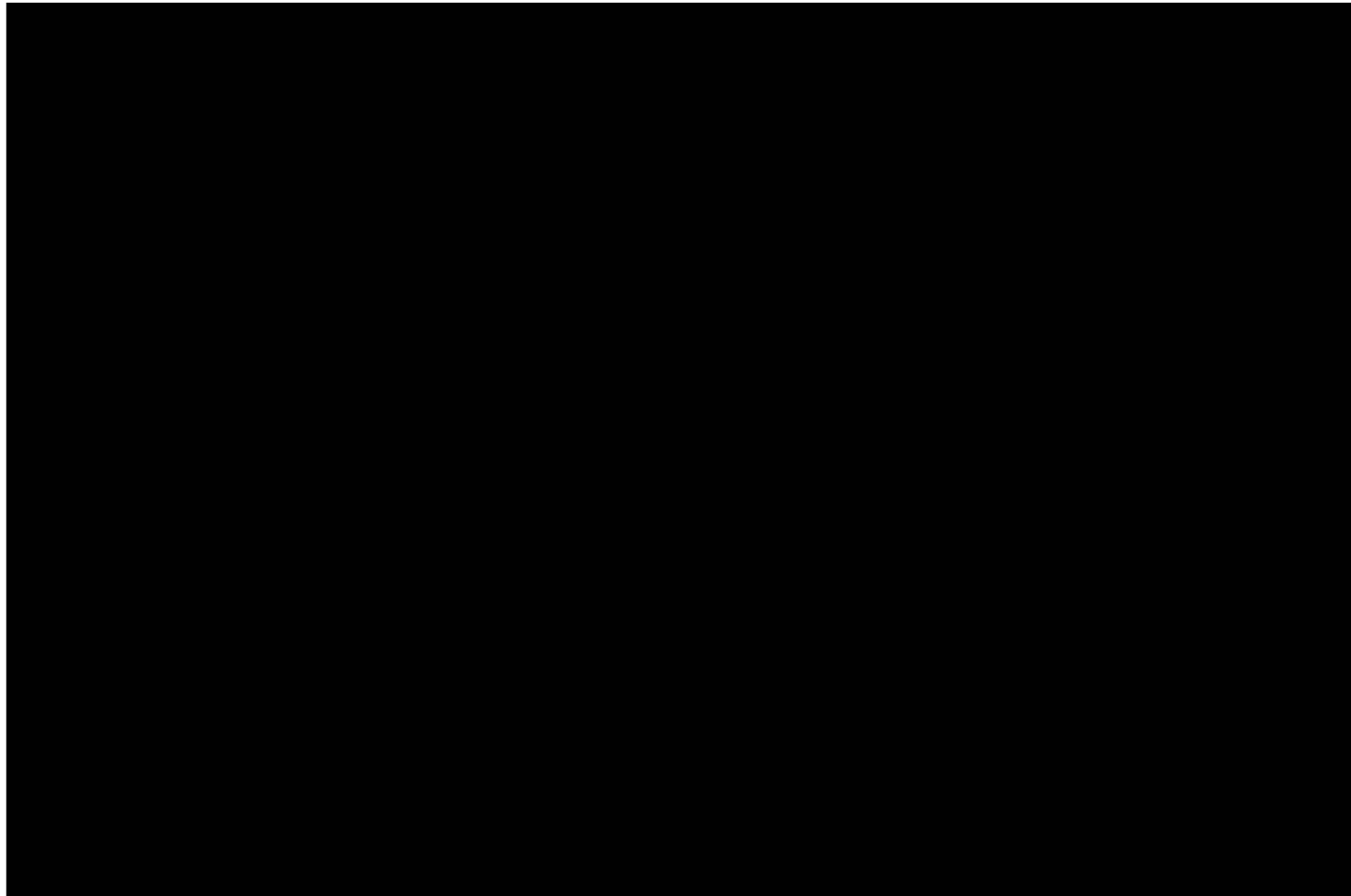
Conclusions

- **Primarily, focus group participants were focused on some very <u>practical initiatives</u> – light signal synchronization, new roads and lane capacity (road widening), and safer infrastructure for walking and biking.**

  - **Acceptance of toll roads (provides choice)**

  . . .And, more transit options were also part of the mix, as a way to create more options—not to "solve" congestion

- **HOWEVER, just framing the conversation about a multi-corridor expansion of mass transit—especially light rail and commuter rail—has <u>major perceptual obstacles</u>.**

  (Cont'd)

Conclusions

The focus groups raised obstacles such as. .

- Very limited first-hand experience with transit of any type.

- Perception by many that transit "just doesn't work here."

- Transportation is seen as a very narrow issue—it's not really viewed in the context of jobs, recruiting businesses, competing against peer metro areas, or land use.

- These perceptions are a backdrop for other major concerns about taxes, low confidence in local government, the economy. . .

Recommendations

- **Evaluate options that are targeted ("first mile/last mile")**
  - Light synchronization, pedestrian & bikepath connections, bus service, road enhancements
  - Incremental approach to expanding transit

- **Educate about transportation, with a focus on the perceptual obstacles.**
  - Elements of mass transit, how the system works, considerations in expanding the system (modes, corridors)

- **Maximize the current transit system—and tell the story about it.**
  - Create familiarity with transit – and this could include a demonstration rail line.

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Questions,
Discussion

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