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Park-And-Rides are on Tallahassee's horizon

StarMetro's future hubs: car park, bus stop, shopping center all in one

Julian Pecquet
DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER

Instead of commuting by car all the way to work, imagine being able to safely park and hop on a bus, keeping your drive time to a minimum.

That's the vision touted by the city of Tallahassee's transit system, which is considering up to five park-and-ride lots on routes where bus service exists or has been proposed.

The locations, at the city's periphery, are along major arteries where StarMetro officials hope to beef up bus ridership over the long haul. The goal is to have people park in business areas where they'll be able to do their shopping after work, before heading home.

"When we're talking about park-and-rides, we're not talking about parking lots that are sitting by themselves in the middle of nowhere," said Sam Scheib, a senior planner with StarMetro, the city of Tallahassee's transit system. "That doesn't do anybody any good. The target is a symbiotic relationship with the store."

Thanks to a partnership between StarMetro and members of the Knight Creative Communities Initiative, the first park-and-ride lots to get the city's seal of approval should officially start operating in September.

LaRae Donnellan, a member of the Knight Initiative's "greenovation" committee who uses the bus to commute to Florida A&M University from the city's northeast, said the pilot project will go on from Sept. 4 to Dec. 7. The greenovation team has reached an agreement with Premier Health and Fitness and the law firm of Smith, Thompson, Shaw and Manausa for about 40 spaces off Thomasville Road north of I-10; the businesses are providing the spaces for free, and StarMetro has agreed to provide park-and-ride signs for the lots.

"We wanted to start with something now," Donnellan said, "to show some results within the next few months."

The Florida Department of Transportation currently operates a park-and-ride lot in Leon County, on the right-hand side of South Monroe Street just before it becomes Woodville Highway. But the city is hoping to add many more.

One solution is to work with existing businesses, to see if they're ready to set aside some spots

for commuters to use, Scheib said. But the city also wants to work with developers so that park-and-ride spaces and bus routes and bus shelters will be incorporated into the design of new developments at an early stage.

That's how things work in Jacksonville, which has had more experience with the concept. That city has operated park-and-ride lots since the 1970s, said Steve Arrington, the director of resource development for the Jacksonville Transportation Authority, and currently has almost 5,000 park-and-ride spots at periphery of the business district, in the suburbs and farther south near the county line.

Arrington said working with developers was one of the best options, but added that it could mean having park-and-rides that stay empty for years before the development takes off.

"Long-term, it's probably a real smart decision," he said. "Short-term, you're going to get a lot that's not very well used in some cases."

He said it's wise planning for cities to own or have long-term leases for the park-and-ride lots, instead of relying on businesses' good graces.

"They tend to want you until business is good," he said. "And then they want you out."