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Inching forward

The region needs StarMetro

On Thursday, StarMetro, the city's bus system, is having another of its frequent "listening sessions" open to the public.

Oh, for the community center at 1115 Dade Street (5-6:30 p.m.) to be overflowing and enthusiasm running high for all the ways Tallahassee could become a model of public transportation.

As things now stand, and with the city's budget adjusting to state-mandated property tax rollbacks affecting all local governments, building a better bus system isn't going to happen here overnight.

But given that we had a 1950s-style public transportation here for many years, the progress is good in several areas - primarily the routes aimed at university students - and the long-term vision still exists for expanding into a less-centralized and more regional system that would eventually serve Wakulla or Gadsden commuters.

The state continues to have start-up money for three-year pilot programs such as a partnership that's under consideration with Gadsden County, said StarMetro's senior planner Samuel Scheib. And an application is in the works to expand a route from downtown to SouthWood - a route that was rolled out before its time but which might be ready to expand later this year.

Likewise, StarMetro's relationship with Florida State University is better than ever, with five buses serving not only the campus, but with four traveling on new routes that go off campus, get the students and bring them to campus.

Mr. Scheib said StarMetro has asked Florida A&M University for similar data regarding student housing densities. Once received, it will tailor the A&M routes, Venom I and Venom II, to student residential areas, too.

Anecdotally, Mr. Scheib said the slightly smaller buses being used on the FSU routes - smaller because the campus streets don't easily accommodate the system's 40-foot buses - were greeted by students as being "too small."

This is the complaint heard most often, that the city is using buses too big for its ridership. Mr. Scheib said all the buses in use are full during some portion of their route, and he pointed out that it's not a lot cheaper to operate small buses rather than large ones, or even to purchase smaller buses.

This community has a long way to go to make its public transportation as effective as it could be. The first and biggest step is breaking the addiction most of us - most Americans - have with our own personal vehicles and the flexibility they give us.

As StarMetro's flexibility expands - as its system becomes more regional and less centralized - public transportation will be more competitive with private transportation. That the new leadership at StarMetro is thinking towards the future instead of how things were always done is essential to this transformation. But steady public and political support is needed to make it work.