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## Ambitious rail plan will require big money, willing sellers

BY ROGER WILLIAMS

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Without question, we're mired way back in the 20th century.

Back when they slapped down suburbia way out in the woods, then bulldozed roadways to distant shopping, work and entertainment centers.

It was goodbye, downtown. Goodbye, walking to work — or to the store. And welcome, big brawny sprawling suburban

piston-powered American future.

But now there's a rare chance to alter that, says Bill Spikowski, a longtime west coast planner who helped complete a "feasibility study" roundly accepted by elected officials in Lee County earlier this month.

Those officials, gathering as members of the Metropolitan Planning Organization or MPO, represent each county commission seat, each mayoral chair, and several city council seats.

The study recommends that the county

and the state take steps to buy the railroad bed stretching for about 34 miles from southern Charlotte, through the center of Lee into northern Collier. Possession of that corridor — still in the hands of one owner — could ultimately lead to huge changes in the lifestyles of people in all three counties here.

"We're looking at a million people in Lee, alone, by 2040 — that's a third more

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## RAIL PLAN

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people, and they're coming regardless," says Mr. Spikowski.

"It's not like we can say, 'Stop these people.'

So, are we going to keep doing what we've been doing — are we going to be gridlocked, like people's image of the worst of the east coast?"

Answer: possibly. That is, unless we take advantage of a situation that most communities don't have.

It might work like this: Officials would negotiate on behalf of taxpayers with the owners of the railroad bed, a company called CSX — and they would also negotiate with the company that holds the lease on that railroad corridor for at least the next 34 years. The lease allows the company to run freight and occasional entertainment trains up and down the railway. That leasing company also owns the sidings, the engines and railroad cars, the piles of gravel and everything else that goes with an operational railroad, including a trucking company.

But the advantage in seeing a deal through now (even though the railroad is not currently for sale), is that local government could own a transportation corridor that will never be available again, says Mr. Spikowski.

Once the public owns the corridor, then it could be used in conjunction with freight and busses or other public transport to move hundreds of thousands of commuters each day to key stops in North Fort Myers or Cape Coral, Fort Myers, Lehigh Acres, Bonita Springs, Estero, and a southern terminus near Immokalee Road in northern Collier County.

From there, commuters could reach

work, shopping or entertainment venues with relative ease, and without the huge expense of driving.

And that could make living in a three-county region where the population could rocket toward the two million mark by 2040, at least tenable.

"You couldn't even think about this in Lee if this (railroad) corridor didn't exist," Mr. Spikowski says.

"We did the same thing for I-75 in the 1970s — we went out and bought it, because at that point it was just outland in the country.

"Now, in the country or through the wetlands, there's no way to do that anymore."

The price for the railroad bed, according to the study, would not be particularly high — it's valued at no more than \$15 million, he says.

The problem would come in the subsequent costs — in creating a bed and a track that would support not just freight but light rail; and in ensuring that other forms of public transportation would be present to support commuters.

Wayne Daltry, the former head of Smart Growth, points out that the new and broadly embraced report "doesn't endorse 'light rail,' it endorses getting the management of the railroad out of (private) hands so some planning can be done, and freight rail service be promoted rather than driven into the ground."

### The long (rail) road ahead

Lee Commissioner Frank Mann, who has long wrestled with transportation questions, is subdued about the possibilities of any quick fixes using the rail corridor.

"There are huge obstacles to this concept," he warns.

"Everybody is in total agreement that it would be smart to preserve the railroad corridor for future use for local transportation needs.

"But there's a complicated contract



Transportation planners envision using existing railroads that run from North Naples to Charlotte County to provide commuter service in the future. between (Seminole-Gulf Railway) and

CSX (the owners of the corridor) that runs for almost 40 years. So both of those parties need to be a part of any discussion we're having right now — because the railroad corridor is not for sale."

As a result, the MPO will recommend to the state, who could help make the initial purchase, that negotiations to buy the corridor begin.

"But the state's not going to do anything right now if we don't have a specific plan," Commissioner Mann concludes.

One obstacle is negotiation, but another is future cost.

Mr. Daltry assess it this way:

"It is not feasible without about \$20 billion of land intensity investments, or about a quarter million people having direct (bus) connection to the line.

"Seattle has such a 'rubber rail' system, Portland more straight-up bus service, that connect to fixed rail.

"In other words, the next quarter million people that move here would have to go to development (near the rail lines), and the rail service would be needed almost at the beginning, or why live there?"

History, in some sense, is our enemy.

"We failed miserably at (containing sprawl), but it's been the policy," late Lee County Commissioner Charlie Bigelow recalled in 2011.

Mr. Bigelow was a significant part of that history, helping develop the first modern Comprehensive Plan more than 30 years ago.

But unlike in some other parts of the country where officials created boundaries they never bent, "here we just drew the hell out of boundaries," he admitted. "We amended (them) routinely based on who was asking for what, where. So (they) served hardly any purpose in terms of containing sprawl.

"I don't think we anticipated the lack of political commitment that might exist to contain sprawl." ■