

# ST. PETERSBURG CITY COUNCIL

## Reports

Meeting of June 2, 2022

**TO:** The Honorable Gina Driscoll, Chair, and Members of City Council

**SUBJECT:** Update on SunRunner Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) Project

**EXPLANATION:** At the June 2<sup>nd</sup> City Council meeting, Administration and PSTA staff will provide City Council with an update regarding the construction of, and soon-to-open, SunRunner Bus Rapid Transit project (SunRunner). Although the presentation will be limited to recent, current, and future activities, this written explanation provides additional background and context for the benefit of those who may wish to more fully understand the planning and milestones that led to this point in the project timeline. The SunRunner has been under construction since September 2020. It will be a train-like, premium transit service that will connect downtown St. Petersburg to South Pasadena and St. Pete Beach with an end to end travel time of 35 minutes. The service will run every 15 minutes from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. and every 30 minutes from 8 p.m. to midnight every day. SunRunner is the Tampa Bay region's first BRT project funded through the Federal Transit Administration's (FTA's) Capital Investment Grant Program. The SunRunner will offer a modern, fast, and reliable transportation service that will provide a very competitive alternative to personal vehicles. Project elements that will make the SunRunner a rapid service include semi-exclusive travel lanes along 65% of the route, a limited number of stops, level boarding at stations, and transit signal priority that gives buses additional green time to travel through intersections if they are behind schedule. The SunRunner supports the City's economic development and redevelopment goals in the downtown area and along the Central Avenue corridor. SunRunner service is anticipated to begin in September of this year and will operate fare-free for the first six months. The projected ridership is 4,000 riders per day, and it is anticipated to rapidly become the highest-ridership route in the PSTA system.

The City and PSTA began studying the feasibility of a BRT service along the Central Avenue corridor in the early 2000s. The Pinellas County Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), now more commonly known as Forward Pinellas, had previously studied a series of premium transit technologies that could be implemented along the County's major travel corridors generally located between downtown St. Petersburg and downtown Clearwater. The MPO's study, called the Pinellas Mobility Initiative, identified the Central Avenue corridor as having a higher demand for transit service than corridors containing I-275, Roosevelt Boulevard, Ulmerton Road, U.S. 19, Gulf to Bay Boulevard, and U.S. Alternate 19. Based on this finding, the City applied for and was awarded federal funding to study the feasibility of a premium transit service in the greater downtown area. The City began the "Downtown St. Petersburg East-West Transit System Study" in 2002 and completed the study in 2004. BRT was selected as the preferred technology over streetcar to connect downtown destinations to Grand Central Station because of its ridership potential and cost effectiveness. The excess capacity of the City's major road network made BRT a viable option for providing a rapid alternative to driving in personal vehicles. The PSTA began

their study of BRT service in St. Petersburg in 2005 to further refine the alignment and service. The 1<sup>st</sup> Avenues were selected as the alignment to connect downtown to Grand Central Station and extensions to western St. Petersburg and the beaches were evaluated. The PSTA completed its study in 2007, but the recession occurred and PSTA did not apply to the FTA for capital funding.

While the implementation of a BRT system was put on hold, efforts to improve local transit service and prepare the Central Avenue corridor for premium transit service continued. In 2009, the City and PSTA initiated the Central Avenue Trolley (CAT) between Grand Central Station and The Pier at 15-minute headways. CAT service was later extended to St. Pete Beach. The City subsidizes CAT service between the downtown waterfront to Grand Central Station to provide lower fares. The City applied for Congressional Earmarks in 2009 and 2010 for the Central Avenue BRT Corridor Enhancement Project and received \$975,000 to improve pedestrian facilities along the BRT corridor. The City completed the Central Avenue Revitalization Plan (CARP) in 2012. To implement the objectives of the CARP, the City initiated amendments in 2014 to the Land Development Regulations, Future Land Use Map and Zoning Map related to the Central Avenue corridor from 19<sup>th</sup> Street to Pasadena Avenue, including an Activity Center overlay to allow land developments to be built at higher densities and intensities. Ridership on the CAT has grown consistently and in FY 2019 the CAT was the third most popular route in the PSTA system. The CAT will continue to operate after the SunRunner opens because it is expected to remain a successful route due to the direct service it provides for shorter trips compared to the SunRunner.

In 2015, PSTA received a grant from the FDOT to begin a new study to examine the feasibility of a BRT service from downtown St. Petersburg to western St. Petersburg along the Central Avenue corridor and one of three routes to the Gulf beaches, which included St. Pete Beach, Treasure Island and Madeira Beach. The PSTA completed the project development phase in the summer of 2017. Service to St. Pete Beach was the preferred western terminus. On August 24, 2017, the St. Petersburg City Council approved Resolution No. 2017-487 to support the PSTA in its efforts to design and construct the Central Avenue BRT Project and request Administration to identify local funding to match state and federal grants and negotiate a funding agreement with the PSTA for City Council's consideration. The PSTA submitted the project to the FTA CIG Small Starts rating process in September 2017 and received a favorable rating.

During 2019, the City entered into three agreements with PSTA to further support the project. The City provided \$750,000 in local funding to PSTA for public art at SunRunner stations in St. Petersburg (March 7, 2019 meeting, Resolution No. 2019-110) and committed \$4 million from Intown Community Development Area and Multimodal Impact Fee funds towards PSTA's local match for the requested Small Starts funding (June 13, 2019 meeting, Resolution No. 2019-311). City Council approved an interlocal agreement with PSTA to identify the responsibilities of PSTA and the City related to the design, construction, maintenance and operation of the BRT service and associated facilities (October 17, 2019 meeting, Resolution No. 2019-534). The PSTA and their consultants continued to work on design plans throughout 2019, which were completed in the spring of 2020.

On May 29, 2020, the U.S. Department of Transportation announced that \$21.8 million would be awarded to PSTA for the project. The PSTA also received \$11 million in State funding from the

FDOT. The combined total of the local match from the PSTA and City of St. Petersburg was \$11.6 million. After undergoing an extensive branding exercise, the project was renamed as the SunRunner BRT project. Construction began in September 2020. Besides the City's contribution towards public art at SunRunner stations in St. Petersburg, the City is constructing a series of sidewalk and curb ramp improvements along the 1<sup>st</sup> Avenues, Central Avenue, and the north-south streets in the vicinity of the SunRunner stations to provide safe and convenient pedestrian access to the SunRunner service, which are being funded through the Central Avenue BRT Corridor Enhancement federal grant.

The Transportation and Parking Management Department, Engineering and Capital Improvements Department, and Stormwater, Pavement and Traffic Operations Department have participated in weekly coordination meetings with PSTA during the construction of the SunRunner the last 21 months. The Planning and Development Services Department has worked with PSTA on their recently completed SunRunner Rising Study, in which PSTA and their consultant are studying potential land use changes around SunRunner stations to further support Transit Oriented Development. The City's Marketing Department continues to provide information about the purpose of the project and status of construction to the public. The Greenhouse is assisting business owners along the SunRunner route.

With the SunRunner service scheduled to open this Fall, City staff continues to work closely on the remaining construction tasks with PSTA and its contractors to ensure that the SunRunner service has a successful start. The red pigmented asphalt started to be installed within the city limits during the second week of May. Station platforms have largely been completed and soon shelters and stop amenities will be installed, including the public art funded by the City. The temporary road striping will be replaced by permanent, thermoplastic striping. Power will be provided to the stations. Upgrades to the signal system will occur and signal timing will be adjusted as necessary to effectuate the efficient flow of traffic for the 1<sup>st</sup> Avenues as well as intersecting north-south streets. City staff will continue to work with PSTA to address issues that may occur during the first and future years of service and make adjustments to ensure the SunRunner service is operating efficiently and serving the transportation needs of St. Petersburg residents, employees and visitors.

**APPROVALS:** Joseph F. Zooli Administrative N/A Budget