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TRANSPORTATION

Meet the guy behind St. Pete's trailblazing dedicated bus route



Abhishek Dayal
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Person

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Abhishek Dayal moved to the United States from his home in New Delhi, India to earn his master's degree in urban planning after spending the early part of his life surrounded by congestion.

Now, the young urban planner is heading the Central Avenue bus rapid transit plan that is forging a path for better transit throughout Pinellas County and the greater Tampa Bay region.

Dayal is the Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority director of project management for the Central Avenue BRT project. He's been on the job since April.

"I'm hoping the BRT project spawns some other interesting projects in the region," Dayal said. "That could be extensions of BRT or even dabbling in light rail. We'll see if [light rail] is still a dirty word after the BRT project."



PSTA BRT rendering

PSTA

Local transportation planners recognize the proposed route is important to the future of transit planning for the region. Of the 55 transit studies in the Tampa Bay area over the past 30 years, the Central Avenue BRT project is the first to receive the Federal Transit Administration's second highest ranking, medium-high, which positions the project well for a \$20 million New Starts grant.

That grant would pay for a little less than half of the \$42 million project.

Dayal is confident PSTA will receive reimbursements from the FTA in that grant proposal and is moving forward with early designing for the 8.5-mile corridor, which would run on First Avenues North and South between downtown St. Petersburg and St. Pete Beach. He's currently reviewing

design firms to get into the particulars about where to put stations, how they should be oriented and what they should look like.

Dayal expects to have a decision before the PSTA board later this month. A draft agenda for the Aug. 22 meeting tentatively shows him presenting recommendations, but the agency won't release company names. Designs should be done in about a year, with construction starting in late 2019. Transit planners hope to have the route operational in late 2020.

For now, Dayal shared some vague details about the route. It will include business access transit lanes, which means they'll be dedicated for transit but general traffic could use the lanes to access business entrances. Those lanes give transit vehicles the benefit of a dedicated lane without having to build the route's alignment away from businesses. Dayal also said the stations will likely all be different, depending on how many other bus routes access the same station and how frequently it is used.

Stations will be covered to provide shade from Florida's sun and protection from sporadic thunderstorms.

Dayal is leading a team through a collaborative process that includes the federal government, the state Department of Transportation, the cities of St. Pete and St. Pete Beach as well as local stakeholders.

"But once we can prove this can work not only in a dense corridor, but in partnership with multiple jurisdictions and through collaboration, we can really invest in what's right for the region," Dayal said.

That's an important part of the overall transit dilemma throughout the Tampa Bay area. Dayal, and others at PSTA, hope once there is proof of concept showing what dedicated transit lanes can do for reliable service, it will steamroll other agencies to follow suit and encourage local stakeholders to agree to pay for it.

A group of citizens in Hillsborough County recently acquired enough petition signatures to put a 1 percent sales tax increase on the November ballot to fund road and transit enhancements, but such measures have historically been unsuccessful. Greenlight Pinellas tanked at the ballot box in 2014 with well over 60 percent of the electorate saying no to the same tax increase. Hillsborough County voters rejected another initiative in 2010.

That’s not the only challenge Dayal will have to face as he moves toward implementing Central Avenue BRT and future projects. St Pete Beach is not a member city, which means it doesn't contribute property taxes to help pay for bus service. PSTA had been counting on a \$1.5 million payment from St. Pete Beach, but the city has yet to sign off on that expense.

Dayal said he’ll continue to listen to critics.

“Collaboration and communication with all the stakeholders involved was something I learned in Phoenix that really pays a lot of dividends down the road,” Dayal said.

Prior to joining PSTA, Dayal served as director of project management for the Valley Metro Regional Public Transportation Authority, where he served on the team that implemented Phoenix’s first light rail transit.

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