

1: Introduction

Sarasota County Area Transit (SCAT) initiated an Alternatives Analysis (AA) in the fall of 2007 to consider and select a preferred alternative and alignment for bus transit service improvements in the Sarasota North-South corridor. The corridor begins in the north around the Sarasota-Manatee County line near Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport and connects to downtown Sarasota, Sarasota Memorial Hospital and Westfield Mall to the south.

This AA is another step by SCAT and Sarasota County in the ongoing development of an interconnected regional transit system that will improve the quality of transit service in the Sarasota metropolitan area. The purpose of the North-South corridor transit improvement is to:

- Improve the quality, speed, and attractiveness of transit services in the core area of the region, particularly in areas of highest residential and employment density;
- Support regional economic development by improving transit access for key employment sites and activity centers;
- Improve the operating efficiency of transit services, operating in congested corridors and roadways; and,
- Support long-term sustainable development and land use in the region.

Background on the AA Process

The Sarasota-Manatee Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) and other regional and local stakeholders have identified and reported on transportation and mobility problems in the North-South corridor and have included high frequency/high capacity transit improvements in this corridor in the regional transportation plan and local planning efforts. SCAT and Sarasota County initiated the AA planning study to provide sufficient technical information to assess transit alternatives and alignments in the corridor leading to the selection of a locally preferred alternative. The AA first identifies the specific study area and travel markets, and outlines the mobility problems within the corridor. From this understanding, flow the development of transit alternatives that might best address these problems and the identification of evaluation criteria for assessing the costs and benefits of the each alternative. The AA study team then gathered information on the costs and benefits and impacts associated with each of the alternatives to provide a sound technical basis for local decision-makers. The documentation and findings of this planning study are presented in this Final Report.



SCAT is considering that portions of the capital cost for design and construction of the selected transit improvement may be funded by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), specifically under the Section 5309 Small Starts program. Federal law requires that projects seeking funding under this program must complete an Alternatives Analysis and must meet certain technical and procedural requirements. SCAT has completed this AA in adherence to FTA guidelines and sound planning practices. Planning and project development efforts to date have been supported by a combination of Federal formula planning grants, and State and local funds. In 2007, SCAT was one of twenty-six projects selected by FTA in a nationwide competition to receive funds under the Section 5339 Alternatives Analysis Discretionary Program. Under this program, SCAT received a \$194,000 grant to support technical work related to travel demand forecasting and market research to enable completion of the AA.

SCAT has worked closely with Sarasota County, the City of Sarasota, the Sarasota-Manatee Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) and other planning entities and stakeholders in the region and corridor in the completion of the AA. Building on earlier regional planning studies, SCAT held kickoff meetings in September and October 2007 to introduce the proposed corridor and the AA process to a wide spectrum of stakeholders representing community groups, universities, and other quasi-public entities, private developers, and local planning agency personnel. Following these kickoff meetings, SCAT created smaller-sized “technical working groups” made up of stakeholders and technical professionals. The following three working groups were formed in early 2008 and worked with SCAT during the AA study period:



- **Engineering and/Operations** – providing input and review on BRT alignments and stop locations, traffic and pedestrian interface, and transit service characteristics and operations;
- **Land Use and Development** – providing input and review on current and anticipated land use and development characteristics in the corridor; and,
- **Communications** – supporting SCAT community outreach, elected official communications, and information dissemination.

SCAT has considered a range of service improvements in this AA to introduce what is commonly referred to as “Bus Rapid Transit” (BRT) in this corridor. BRT system elements can include a variety of cost-effective mechanisms to improve the travel speed and reliability of bus transit services in a specific corridor and to improve passenger amenities and level of service for the traveling public. BRT system elements considered in this corridor include:

- Roadway and other infrastructure enhancements to create a dedicated transit guideway where feasible to improve bus travel speeds and efficiencies;
- Traffic signal priority and queue jump lanes for buses at selected intersections to further improve operating efficiencies;
- Increased bus operating frequencies, spans-of-service and passenger information systems to improve the level of bus transit service and quality of rider experience; and
- Improved passenger stations and other amenities to improve passenger comfort and create a more pleasant experience for the rider.

Chapter seven of this report outlines the selection process of the Locally Preferred Alternative (LPA) by the SCAT Board and they and the MPO Board have been informed that the Small Starts criteria need to be submitted to FTA for review and approval.

The SCAT Board and the Sarasota-Manatee MPO Board selected the LPA in late September 2008, and the MPO Board re-affirmed the selected BRT project in the financially feasible Long Range Transportation Plan. The alignment referred to as the railroad right-of-way (Alternative 2) was selected as the LPA.

Outline of this Final Report

The purpose of this report is to document and present the findings of the Sarasota North-South corridor AA. This planning study led to the selection by Sarasota County and the MPO of a locally preferred alternative (LPA). The MPO has formally adopted the LPA into the Financially Feasible program of Long Range

Transportation Plan. SCAT plans to submit project information to FTA, in accordance with FTA program requirements, in order to advance the project into the Project Development phase of the Small Starts program.

The remainder of this report includes the following:

- Chapter 2: Description of Study Area, Problems and Needs;
- Chapter 3: Goals, Objectives and AA Overview;
- Chapter 4: Alternatives Considered;
- Chapter 5: Evaluation of Alternatives;
- Chapter 6: Financial Analysis;
- Chapter 7: Recommended Alternative and Next Steps;
- Appendix A: List of Public, Stakeholders Working Group Meetings;
- Appendix B: Alternatives Screening;
- Appendix C: Ridership Evaluation Methodology;
- Appendix D: Land Use Documentation/Maps;
- Appendix E: Regional Adopted Transit Strategies;
- Appendix F: FTA Small Starts Program and Requirements.