

# Project Conception Report

Pinellas Gondola Feasibility Study  
For TBARTA & Forward Pinellas



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**SCJ ALLIANCE**  
CONSULTING SERVICES

# Project Conception Report

## Project Information

Project: **Pinellas Gondola Feasibility Study**  
Prepared for: **Tampa Bay Area Regional Transit Authority (TBARTA)  
& Forward Pinellas**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Aerial gondolas have been contemplated in Pinellas County for a number of years. Pinellas County is densely populated, space-constrained and transportation/geographically challenged. Aerial gondolas may be part of a multimodal transportation network. Aerial cable-propelled transit systems are widely used in Latin America and being actively studied in a dozen cities in North America.

SCJ Alliance (SCJ) and its subconsultants, Stantec, Transpo Group, Valerin and HR&A, were selected by TBARTA and Forward Pinellas to study gondolas as transit in both Clearwater and St. Petersburg. The study in questions is split into two projects, one for each city. The scope of work for each project includes stakeholder and public engagement, gondola alignment alternative analyses, S.W.O.T. analyses, and a study of project financing and economics. It is anticipated that the study will conclude early in 2022.

As part of the first phase, SCJ has conducted most of the stakeholder engagement activities, prepared recommendations for project Study Areas, prepared recommended project Purpose & Needs Statements and identified areas that could be connected by transit gondolas. This report is intended to document the finding of this first phase.

## 2. PROJECT STUDY AREAS

The first step in conceptualizing the gondola projects considered in this study was to identify the study areas. The following describes the two study areas and the rationale for the selected areas:

### Clearwater Project



**Figure 1 – Clearwater Project Study Area**

The Clearwater project area is primarily situated around the Clearwater Memorial Causeway. It is understood that the Causeway is often congested and a hindrance to vehicular traffic traveling between Clearwater Beach and Downtown Clearwater in both directions. Aerial gondolas are seen as a possible transit solution to this traffic congestion.

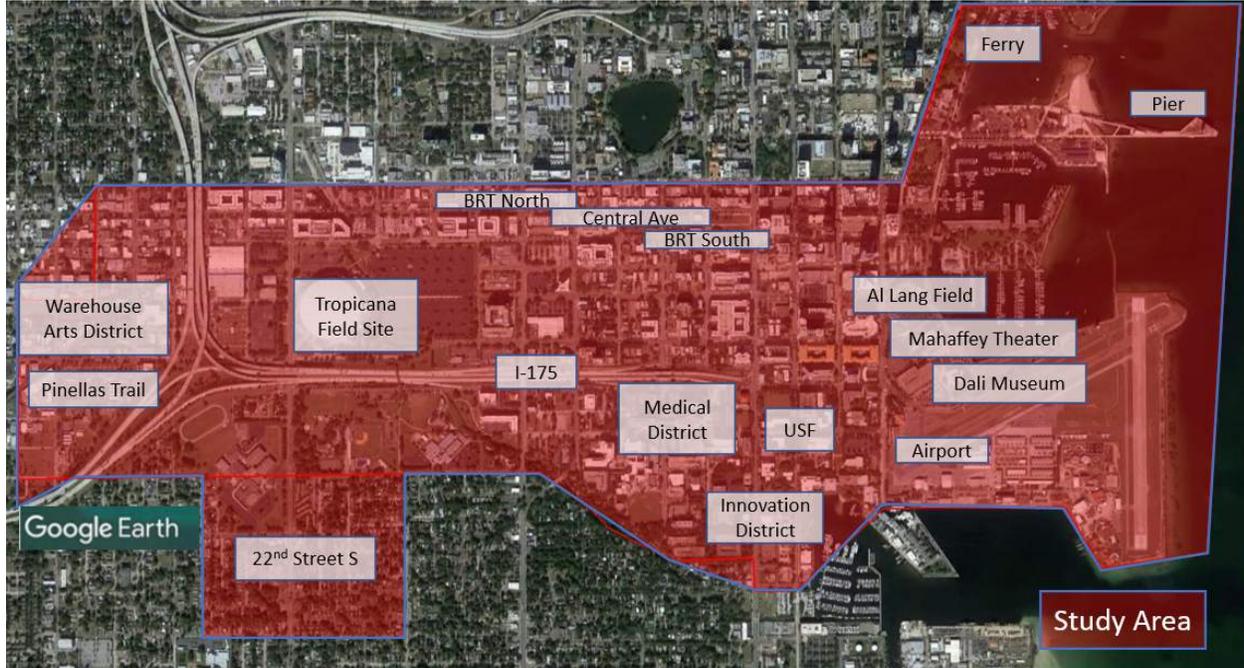
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The Clearwater project area was specifically arranged to because it accomplishes the following:

- Encompasses the primary centers of activity generally:
  - Clearwater Beach,
  - Downtown Clearwater and
  - Clearwater Marine Aquarium.
- Includes sufficient area to study the possibility of reducing vehicle traffic on the Causeway.
- Includes land areas owned by the City and sufficient to support a gondola system.
- Includes the beachside parking area adjacent to Pier 60 and marina parking area in Clearwater Beach.
- Includes Coachman Park and the Imagine Clearwater Project area. Includes a number of land parcels owned by the City and slated for redevelopment. Includes the area around the proposed Transit Hub.

It should be noted that consideration has been given to the extension of the study area north and south within Clearwater Beach to include hotel areas, restaurant areas and other tourist and employment centers. While these areas have merit from a transit-perspective, SCJ believes that increasing the study area north and south along Clearwater Beach would add significant complexity to the study in excess of what is possible to achieve within the allotted schedule and budget. SCJ is of the opinion that these areas should be considered in later project phases if the project advances. It is thought that a Downtown Clearwater to Clearwater Beach connection would likely represent the first phase of an ultimate gondola project and secondary routes within Clearwater Beach and Downtown Clearwater could be introduced in later phases.

St. Petersburg Project



**Figure 2 – St. Petersburg Project Study Area**

The St. Petersburg project area generally encompasses the area between the Warehouse Arts District and the shore of Tampa Bay. In the north-south direction, the study area ranges from 13<sup>th</sup> Avenue South in the south to the Pier to the north. The primary focus of the St. Peterburg study area is areas of activity and interest around the downtown core.

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The St. Petersburg project area was specifically arranged to because it accomplishes the following:

- Encompasses the following activity areas:
  - Warehouse Arts District,
  - Pinellas Trail
  - Tropicana Field Site,
  - African American Heritage Trail,
  - 22<sup>nd</sup> Street,
  - Medical District (south of I-175),
  - University of South Florida,
  - Downtown St. Petersburg,
  - Central Arts District,
  - Innovation District,
  - Dali Museum,
  - Mahaffey Theater,
  - Al Lang Field,
  - The Airport,
  - Waterfront Arts District,
  - Cross-Bay Ferry and
  - The St. Petersburg Pier.

It should be noted that consideration has been given to extend the study area south of 13<sup>th</sup> Avenue S, West as far as 34<sup>th</sup> Street S and north to I-375. While these areas have merit from a transit-perspective, SCJ believes that increasing the study area to these extents would add significant complexity to the study in excess of what is possible to achieve within the allotted schedule and budget. SCJ is of the opinion that these areas should be considered in later project phases if the project advances. It is thought that a shorter east-west gondola system would likely represent the first phase of an ultimate gondola project and secondary routes to the west, south and north could be introduced in later phases.

### 3. STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY

As part of the first phase of the study, SCJ engaged with, and continues to engage with, 20+ stakeholders having interest in the project areas. The stakeholders included:

- Mayors
- City Council Members
- County Commissioners
- Neighborhood Associations
- Business Associations
- Transit Operators
- City Staff
- Tourism Groups

The following is a summary by project of generalized themes that were identified through the engagement:

#### Clearwater Project

- Recurring Primary Themes:

- ✓ Implementing the gondola would create a single district out of Clearwater Beach and Downtown Clearwater. A more convenient way of traveling between Clearwater Beach and Downtown Clearwater would allow Beach visitors to access more restaurants in Downtown.
- ✓ Gondola would help people access the redeveloped Coachman Park. The ferry may not have sufficient capacity and roadway access is difficult.
- ✓ There is a need to improve transportation for employees working on Clearwater Beach.
- ✗ The implementation of a gondola could impact the views from properties in Clearwater. Opposition to the gondola is anticipated.
- ✗ If a gondola is implemented, what could passengers bring with them (coolers, etc.), how many transfers, how far of a walk?
- ✗ Is more transportation access to Clearwater Beach in the best interest of Clearwater? The Causeway acts as a constraint on beach traffic.
- ✗ Skepticism has been expressed about whether the gondola would take any congestion off the causeway.
- The gondola is only as good as the availability of convenient parking in Downtown Clearwater.
- A stop at the Clearwater Marine Aquarium is desired.
- The cost to ride the gondola must be affordable for locals.
- If the gondola is implemented, the financial risk to the government needs to be limited.

- Less-Frequent Themes:

- It would be better if a gondola connects to a “wider transportation network” (currently limited).
- The changing demographics of the Clearwater Beach visitors needs to be considered.
- People want choice in transportation options.
- How will people move up and down the beach if they ride a gondola?
- There is an existing concern about the accessibility of Clearwater Beach for emergency vehicles with backup on the Causeway.
- Gondola passengers should be able to purchase a day pass for convenience and multiple trips.
- The connection with the Jolley Trolley on the beach side would help resolve some of the first mile/last mile issues.

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### St. Petersburg Project

- Recurring Primary Themes:

- ✓ Integration with the ferry to Tampa would be advantageous.
- ✓ A gondola could aid in the reconnection of the areas north and south of I-175.
- ✓ St. Petersburg is open to innovation (gondola is seen as innovative).
  
- ✗ Waterfront property owners will be sensitive to view impact.
- ✗ A gondola system would need to be a benefit to residents, not just tourists. A gondola system must serve the less-affluent citizens, not just the affluent Downtown residents.
- ✗ Skepticism of the technology is expected due to a lack of familiarity.
- ✗ Will system favor some attractions over others?
- ✗ Skepticism that a gondola would work in Downtown St. Petersburg since it is already pretty walkable. There is concern that the gondola could be seen as a novelty.
  
- A gondola system must have a stop at the Tropicana Field Site.
- If the gondola is implemented, the financial risk to the government needs to be limited.
- There is a preference for a gondola to be located in business districts, not residential neighborhoods.
- A gondola system needs to be integrated with other transportation modes. How would a gondola impact the BRT system on Central Avenue and other modes?

- Less-Frequent Themes:

- CPT is seen as a lower cost, quicker to implement and more convenient technology.
- A gondola system would need air conditioning.
- The Pier is busy and current system of golf carts to take people to and from the pier end and restaurant is not effective.
- Ownership by government (the people) is important, even if over time.
- Consideration should be given to extending the gondola system north to Carillon.
- East-west travel in St. Petersburg is slow. Consider extending west to 22<sup>nd</sup> Street South, 34th Street South or as far as the Tyrone Business District.
- Consideration should be given for connections to Southside neighborhoods.

## 4. PROJECT PURPOSE & NEED STATEMENTS

A key element of preliminary project conceptualization is a Purpose & Need statement or the identification of strategic goals for the project. Given that the Clearwater and St. Petersburg gondola systems are being considered as separate projects, the following describes two sets of project Objectives:

### Clearwater Project

- Create a singular, unified economic destination that connects Clearwater Beach with Downtown Clearwater.
- Disaggregate and disperse economic and recreational activity throughout Downtown Clearwater and the Beach by minimizing the friction of distance between the two districts.
- Alleviate congestion and/or the perception of congestion on the Clearwater Memorial Causeway.
- Enable residents living and tourists staying on Clearwater Beach a convenient means to access the Aquarium, Downtown Clearwater and Coachman Park without the need of a private automobile.
- Relieve hotel, restaurant and beach capacity constraints on Clearwater Beach by encouraging more recreation and spending in Downtown Clearwater.
- Connect with other transit systems and hubs.
- Facilitate reliable, predictable and cost-effective transportation that allows Clearwater Beach workers to reach their places of employment on-time.

### St. Petersburg Project

- Encourage cross-bay traffic by connecting various downtown destinations with the Cross-Bay Ferry.
- Connect with other transit systems and hubs.
- Encourage visitors to partake in a variety of recreational options by minimizing the friction of distance between activity nodes.
- Bridge together communities and downtown St. Petersburg that historically have been disconnected from one another due to I-175 and I-275.
- Join the Tropicana Field site with Downtown St. Petersburg.

## 5. PROJECT CONNECTIVITY CONCEPTS

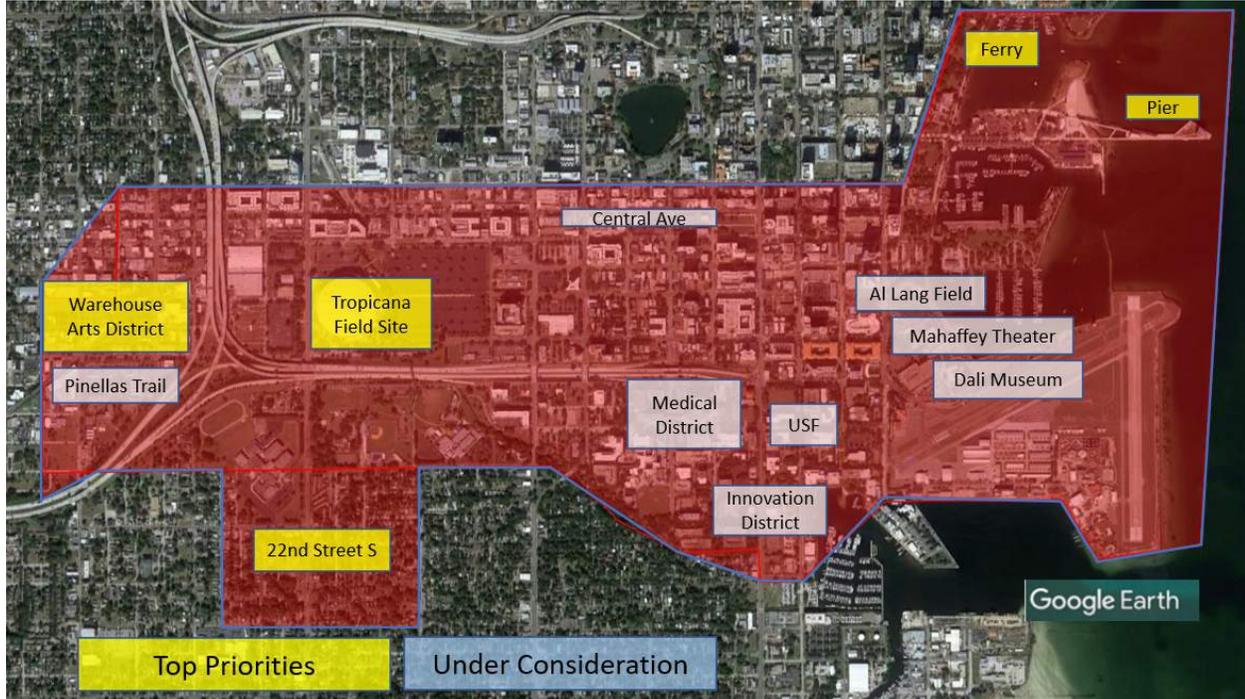
The following figures show the areas within each project area that are likely candidates for connection by the gondola systems. As the gondola alignments are developed, attention will be given to these locations with regards to connectivity. Some locations are designated as “Top Priorities” which are seen as critical areas to be served by the gondola and some areas are designated as “Under Consideration” as these locations would be beneficial but are not critical.

### Clearwater Project



Figure 3 – Clearwater Project Connectivity Locations

St. Petersburg Project



**Figure 4 – St. Petersburg Project Connectivity Locations**

## 6. NEXT STEPS

SCJ has prepared this list of next steps to help explain the process that will follow this conception phase:

### Gondola Alignment Alternative Definition, Analysis and Selection

Following the finalization of the project study areas, purpose & need statements and connectivity locations, SCJ will lead the development and analysis of alignment alternatives for both projects. This work will conclude with a report and presentation to the SAC. This work is expected to extend through August.

### ... & Beyond

- Technical Advancement of Preferred Alignments
- Study of Economics and Financing
- Strengths & Weaknesses Analysis
- Public Engagement
- Close-Out Report and Presentation