

Obama will announce funding for high-speed rail in Tampa

By Alex Leary

President Barack Obama will use Thursday's visit to Tampa to announce Florida has secured high-speed rail funding.

The state had applied for \$2.5 billion for a line that would run from Orlando to Tampa. But the White House said no state would get more than half its request right away. Instead, Obama is to cast the award as a down payment.

"It's a pretty good start," said Sen. Bill Nelson, who was pushing for the full funding along with many other elected officials in Florida and longtime advocates of rail.

Despite the setback, officials cast the announcement in breathless terms. "This will be one of the largest boosts to the state's economy since Disney, since the interstate highway system," said Nelson.

"It's going to be the foundation of a more modern Florida," said U.S. Rep. Kathy Castor, D-Tampa.

Obama will allude to the high-speed rail initiative tonight during his State of the Union address, but the details will not be released until Thursday.

The president's visit, which will include a town hall meeting at the University of Tampa, will coincide with announcements by administration officials across the country Thursday.

"Thirteen major corridors will receive awards on Thursday to help develop new high-speed rail infrastructure or begin the transition to high-speed rail," the White House said in a statement. "In addition, smaller awards will also be made for improvements to portions of existing rail lines. Overall, 31 states will benefit from the awards, which will lay the groundwork for a nationwide high-speed rail system.

"The \$8 billion in Recovery Act awards is part of an overall \$13 billion high-speed rail investment the president announced last year as part of his strategic plan for high-speed rail. The other \$5 billion would be funded through the annual budget process."

Florida has a mixed history with rail. Voters in 2000 approved spending for a bullet train for the state. But they quashed it four years later in a repeal vote backed by then-Gov. Jeb Bush.

Obama's \$787 billion economic stimulus has come under increasing attack from critics who say it has not created the jobs it promised. Rail backers, however, claim it will bring 23,000 jobs to Florida over four years and create 600 permanent jobs once the line is running. The idea is the rail would eventually extend to Miami.

Many Florida politicians have embraced the concept, including Gov. Charlie Crist, who could appear with Obama tomorrow in Tampa. Crist's rival in the Republican U.S. Senate primary, Marco Rubio, said he supported rail in general but added to his ongoing criticism of the Obama administration.

“I think we should all be concerned about increased spending on anything at a time when the federal government is borrowing money to function.”

Staff writer Amy Hollyfield contributed to this report.