

Business

Region's transit future on the agenda

OUR OPINION: Residents should participate in transportation summit

The South Florida Regional Transportation Authority is hosting, not too surprisingly, an annual transportation summit Saturday in Broward County. This year's summit will focus on the role of transportation in the recession as a job creator, in the effort to reduce global warming and in improving the region's global competitiveness. These are big ideas in need of bold solutions. Residents who go can hear what elected officials, industry professionals and government administrators have to say about these issues.

Spend funds judiciously

There has been hope, for instance, that the economic stimulus bill signed by President Barack Obama Tuesday would include dollars for expanding mass transit. By some estimates, the most transportation-related federal stimulus money South Florida will see is around \$50 million. That's not a huge amount when it comes to transportation and mass-transit projects, but it is better than nothing and should be spent judiciously.

Residents should demand to know how that money will be allocated and by whom. Will it be used to improve the region's mass-transit systems, swallowed up in a highway expansion project or parceled out to so many local governments that its impact is diluted?

What will likely get talked about again at the summit is the need for dedicated funding for the regional-transit authority and other mass-transit projects around the state. The South Florida authority runs Tri-Rail, and other communities, particularly Orlando, are also interested in commuter-rail lines. These need a steady revenue stream. Twice, commuter-rail advocates have seen bills establishing a funding source die or be undermined in the Florida Legislature.

State legislators should put a commuter-rail funding source on their priority list for the coming session. Since completing its second track along the CSX corridor, Tri-Rail has become the fastest-growing commuter-rail line in the country.

Get involved

Another regional mass-transit proposal would use the FEC track that runs through coastal cities in Broward, Miami-Dade and Palm Beach counties as a commuter-rail line. There are public meetings on the proposal this month. Saturday's summit, along with the FEC rail hearings, are good opportunities for South Florida residents to get involved and push officials into taking steps to improve the region's mass transit.