

Florida pledges to seek funds for high-speed rail

Federal lawmakers praised Florida's high-speed rail plans and state transportation officials announced plans to seek money for Orlando-Miami line.

By Alfonso Chardy

Several members of the U.S. House of Representatives held a field hearing Monday in Miami to review national high-speed rail plans, including Florida's project to build a high-speed line between Miami and Tampa via Orlando partly funded by Obama administration stimulus money.

While Florida sought \$2.5 billion for the Tampa-Orlando stretch and \$30 million to advance the Orlando-Miami leg, the Federal Railroad Administration granted Florida \$1.25 billion for Tampa-Orlando and nothing for Orlando-Miami.

But after her testimony Monday afternoon before the House Transportation subcommittee on railroads, pipelines and hazardous materials, Florida Department of Transportation Secretary Stephanie Kopelousos told El Nuevo Herald that her agency will try again to get federal money for both projects.

“We are preparing two applications to get more money for the Tampa-Orlando phase and Miami-Orlando,” Kopelousos said, without citing the specific amount Florida will seek later this year.

Kopelousos' statement was the clearest to date that her agency has not given up on building the Miami-Orlando-Tampa line despite the fact that in January the Obama administration failed to give Florida enough money for the project.

“We are moving forward,” Kopelousos told the subcommittee. “We will continue to apply for funds.”

In the interview with El Nuevo Herald, Kopelousos said her agency will seek money this year from two programs the federal government is offering.

One is a \$115 million program for planning and construction grants for which applications are due May 19 and the other is an additional \$2.5 billion for high-speed rail development that will be available “in the near future,” according to a document distributed at the hearing.

Several of the House members at the hearing, including Republican Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, praised Florida's plans for high-speed rail saying the state can be a model for the rest of the country.

But Diaz-Balart wondered whether the Tampa-Orlando leg will persuade enough drivers to leave their cars at home and become train riders. His concern was based on estimates that the train trip would be only slightly faster than a car trip between the two cities. A document provided at the hearing said the train trip could be accomplished in less than hour, or about 30 minutes less than by car.

But Rep. James L. Oberstar, chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, welcomed Florida's plans.

“The plan that Florida has laid out makes sense for the state,” Oberstar said. “Florida could be a template for the nation.”

In her testimony, Kopelousos estimated that the Orlando-Miami line would cost as much as \$8 billion to build.

The Florida transportation agency sought money for high-speed rail from \$8 billion President Barack Obama offered in stimulus funds for high-speed rail projects.

Of the \$1.25 billion it was awarded for Orlando-Tampa, Joseph C. Szabo, administrator of the Federal Railroad Administration, said his agency planned to pay Florida an initial \$60 million late Monday or Tuesday.

Kopelousos said Florida will seek some money to advance a plan to resume passenger rail service from Jacksonville to Miami along the Florida East Coast Railway eastern shore track now chiefly used by freight trains.

Amtrak ran a special passenger train between Miami and Jacksonville on the FEC line Saturday. If the project succeeds, it could also advance plan to start a Tri-Rail-style commuter rail service on the same east coast line between Miami and Palm Beach County.

The hearing was held at Miami-Dade College's Wolfson campus.