

Keep Florida's rail funding on track

OUR OPINION: Miami-Orlando leg of fast train comes next

The mood at the congressional field hearing in Miami on the status of Florida's high speed rail program was upbeat on Monday, but the undercurrent was one of anxiety.

The cause, naturally enough in a tough economy, is money. Without long-term funding commitments from the federal and state governments, Florida's -- and the nation's -- first high-speed rail project will founder. That can't be allowed to happen. Efficient rail lines -- providing mass transit and freight hauling -- take on even more importance in light of the oil well gushing into the Gulf of Mexico, a grim reminder of the steep costs of continued heavy reliance on automobiles and trucks.

Some members of the U.S. House of Representatives Transportation subcommittee on railroads met with state, local and federal transportation officials at Miami Dade College's Wolfson Campus. Three key House members attending were Florida Reps. Mario Diaz-Balart, Corrine Brown and John Mica.

A successful bid

They were instrumental in helping Florida craft its successful bid for \$1.25 billion in federal stimulus dollars for the first leg of the state's bullet train from Tampa to Orlando, awarded earlier this year.

The plan is to extend the rail from Orlando to Miami, which studies show will be the real moneymaker.

Florida sought \$2.53 billion in stimulus money -- \$30 million of which was to pay for preliminary planning for the Miami-Orlando route. But with only half that amount awarded, the state is using it to jump-start the Tampa-Orlando leg. Florida Department of Transportation Secretary Stephanie Kopelousos told the gathering that the agency is seeking more federal money for both routes, which is only right. The state can't do this alone, and the feds shouldn't abandon what they started.

The Tampa-Orlando leg will cost \$2.5 billion. The Miami-Orlando leg could cost as much as \$8 billion to build, but in its entirety the bullet train will attract, at modest estimates, 10,000 new jobs to the Tampa-Orlando corridor and 15,000 to the Orlando-Miami route. It will also be part of what transit planners see as a seamless mass-transit grid.

The bullet train will end at the intermodal center being built near Miami International Airport, where passengers will be able to take a light rail train into the airport or Metrorail to downtown someday.

Ambitious plans

Meantime, the state is building a light-rail system in the Orlando area and hopes to develop a third along the FEC tracks, which run through downtowns from Miami to Jacksonville.

And while Tri-Rail, the growing commuter train along the CSX tracks west of I-95, got a much-needed \$13-\$15 million annual revenue infusion from the Legislature in a special session linked to the federal high speed rail application, it needs \$500 million for capital improvements.

These plans are ambitious and daunting -- but vital and plausible, too. Putting more Floridians and visitors on rails is doable -- and necessary given the state's projected growth rates -- but it will require leaders' commitments to funding for the long haul.