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Plans outlined for high-speed Florida train

State officials have outlined plans for a new high-speed rail starting with a Tampa-Orlando segment, then a Miami extension.

By Alfonso Chardy

In a few years, high-speed trains may be zooming past slow-moving traffic on congested Florida expressways as they travel from Tampa to Orlando -- and eventually Miami -- at 150 and 180 mph, speeds comparable to small private aircraft.

Bullet trains may come to Florida if -- and it's a big if -- the Florida Department of Transportation persuades the Obama administration to award the state \$2.53 billion in federal stimulus money for development of a high-speed rail system.

The state transportation agency told the federal government that if it gets a share of the \$8 billion President Barack Obama is offering for high-speed rail projects, it will spend about \$2.5 billion to build the Tampa-Orlando segment and about \$30 million to advance the Orlando-Miami segment.

Those core details surfaced last week when the state submitted formal notification, to the Federal Railroad Administration, that it wants some of the \$8 billion the Obama administration plans to make available later in the year.

And now, the state has outlined specifics: possible routes, cost estimates and tentative construction timelines for a project that has long been a dream for some but never fully gotten on track.

A RENEWED PUSH

A decade ago, a bullet-train plan fell apart amid criticism from environmentalists, congressional investigators and politicians.

The renewed effort carries more political punch, with Gov. Charlie Crist among the supporters.

Some details are similar to the state's prior bullet-train project, derailed in 1999 -- but there are major differences in costs and train speeds.

The price tag for the entire corridor from Tampa to Miami would be more than \$11 billion, at least \$5 billion more than the previous plan known as the Florida Overland eXpress, or FOX.

Trains under the new project would travel at top speeds of between 150 mph and more than 180 mph, compared with FOX's proposed 200 mph.

The other difference: In this effort, Crist favors the project. The FOX project was scuttled by then-Gov. Jeb Bush.

“We are very excited about the potential for passenger rail service in the state,” Crist said in a statement released in conjunction with Friday's pre-application. “We believe these projects will enhance the transportation choices of our growing resident and visitor populations.”

According to the pre-application, the Tampa-Orlando segment could be built between October 2011 and October 2014 -- while the Miami extension could be laid down between 2013 and 2017.

The report says the Tampa-Orlando segment would cost about \$3.5 billion -- including “infrastructure, rolling stock and right-of-way.” The Orlando-Miami segment would cost more than \$8 billion, according to the document.

If Florida receives the money, the state would look to leverage it into a partnership with a company or group that would assume the cost of operation and maintenance.

For the Tampa-Orlando segment, Florida proposes to build tracks along the median of Interstate 4, with five stations from downtown Tampa to Orlando International Airport.

According to a map on a state transportation agency website, www.dot.state.fl.us/planning/economicstimulus/, the Miami segment would go from Orlando east to Florida's Atlantic Coast, turn south between Titusville and Merritt Island, and run alongside Interstate 95 to Miami. The line would end at the Miami Intermodal Center -- a massive transit and car-rental hub under construction just east of Miami International Airport.

The plan is not binding and is subject to change. Applications are due beginning in late August, and the federal government expects to begin awarding funds between early fall and December.

SUPPORT FOR PLAN

Florida's blueprint was welcomed by some transit experts.

“I believe, after meeting administration officials including Vice President [Joe] Biden and U.S. Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood, that the Obama Administration understands and agrees with the vital economic impact . . . of having South Florida as part of the nation's high-speed rail initiative,” said Al Maloof, a Miami-Dade Expressway Authority board member who is monitoring the high-speed rail issue.

Frank Rapoport, a partner in Philadelphia in the law and lobbying firm of McKenna Long & Aldridge, which is monitoring nationwide high-speed rail money requests, said Florida is well positioned to secure federal funds.

So far, no one has come forward to criticize the endeavor.

But in the 1990s, several opponents emerged.

A 1999 U.S. Government Accountability Office report said a forecast that trains would carry 8.26 million passengers by 2010 was based on assumptions. One assumption was a belief that airlines would transfer passengers to trains under shared agreements. But airlines said they would be unwilling.