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Coalition supports Orlando-Miami HSR bid

By Leo King

ConnectUs, Inc. reported on Monday that it and its coalition of business, labor and environmental groups had sent letters of support and endorsement to USDOT Secretary Ray LaHood in support of Florida's application seeking \$30 million for the *Preliminary Engineering and NEPA Environmental Studies* for the Orlando-Miami corridor.

"This is the first demonstration of the advantages of working together," said ConnectUS President Ed Turanchik. "We have organizations from around the state supporting the Florida DOT's Orlando-Miami application. We all get the big picture and will continue to work together to see it happen."

FDOT last week split the Tampa-Orlando-Miami project into two separate applications in order to comply with federal funding criteria. Monday's application is under Track 1B and is limited to initial engineering and environmental studies for the Orlando -Miami corridor, according to the coalition.

FDOT will submit a Tract 2 application on October 2 for \$2.5 billion for the Orlando-Tampa corridor.

The Orlando-Miami study will look at two specific corridors. The first would run from Orlando International Airport along the beach line to I-95 and would provide service to Cocoa Beach and Melbourne plus south Florida.

The second alignment would run from Orlando International Airport along the Florida turnpike to Fort Pierce and then to South Florida. Both alignment options would serve West Palm Beach, Fort Lauderdale and end at the Miami Intermodal Center.

In recent weeks, both the North Florida Transportation Planning Organization and the Jacksonville Transportation Authority passed resolutions urging FDOT to start rail plans from Jacksonville to Orlando.

The ConnectUs coalition members supporting the application include Broward Workshop, Florida Building Trades Council, AFL-CIO, Florida Audubon, Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce, Central Florida Partnership, Greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce, South Florida Business Alliance, Tampa Bay Partnership, and Tampa Downtown Partnership.

ConnectUs is a Florida not-for-profit corporation launched on August 18 and claims "in less than five days has over 1,000 individual members."

Elsewhere, *The Lakeland Ledger* reported on August 20 that former Hillsborough County Commissioner Ed Turanchik went to Lakeland on Tuesday as part of a “Connect Us” contingency supporting high-speed rail for Central Florida.

“This is all about showing the president of the United States that this is important to Florida when he begins to make his decision on who gets the high-speed-rail stimulus money,” he said.

Tallahassee has been slow getting the job done – so slow, in fact, that Sen. Bill Nelson (D) had to give state officials a swift kick late last month to get them jump-started.

In a letter to state Senate President Jeff Atwater, House Speaker Larry Cretul and state Democratic leaders, Nelson wrote, “I believe that if we are to have any chance of winning funds from the Recovery Act, the state Legislature must demonstrate its commitment to high-speed rail in Florida. I ask that you consider a letter to [federal transportation] Secretary Ray LaHood that describes your support and vision for the future of high-speed rail, as well as your intention to pass related legislation during the next legislative session. Expressing your support, as the Legislature’s leadership, could make the difference.”

Former Gov. Jeb Bush managed to kill the bullet train not once, but twice. In 2006, at Bush’s urging, a Constitutional amendment passed that repealed the high-speed-rail mandate passed by the voters in an earlier Constitutional amendment.

Even so, the environmental studies have been completed. Ridership studies have been done. Much of the right-of-way already exists, because the first leg of the train will run along the I-4 corridor between Tampa and Orlando. A recent renovation of I-4 took into account access for high-speed-rail tracks.

“If we organize together,” said Turanchik, “by 2011 we can start construction, and by 2013... we will have trains running 150 mph down the I-4 corridor and then on to Miami – and that changes everything forever.”