

Florida seeking \$2.5 billion stimulus for bullet train

The Florida Department of Transportation formally committed itself Friday to building the first segment of a high-speed rail line from Miami to Tampa -- so long as the federal government awards the state the \$2.53 billion it wants for the project.

Competition is intense, but transportation experts said Florida is well positioned -- along with California and Illinois -- to share the \$8 billion the Obama administration is offering to develop a national high-speed rail network. Awards will be announced in December.

“It appears that the Florida, California and Midwest corridors have emerged as clear leaders that would be given the most significant consideration,” said Al Maloof, a member of the Miami Dade Expressway Authority and vice chairman of the local, state and federal advocacy group for the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce.

The group has been active in developing coalitions throughout the state to raise Florida's profile in pursuit of high-speed rail money.

Formal filing of the application marks a second chance for Florida to build a bullet train -- a project on the drawing boards since at least the 1970s.

The last serious project was shelved in 1999 by then Florida Gov. Jeb Bush when he refused to spend more state money on what was then a \$6.3-billion venture.

Sonny Holtzman, a Miami consultant on transportation issues, said Florida stands a good chance to get money because the first Tampa-Orlando segment is among the most feasible because it's among the shortest -- if not the shortest.

The Orlando Sentinel reported Friday that Walt Disney World has endorsed Florida's bid and will provide up to 50 acres of land for a station.

The new project draws on much of the engineering and design of the prior plan. But it will be built in phases -- not all at once.

Documents Florida filed earlier this year with the Federal Railroad Administration show that the first phase would be built between Tampa and Orlando at a cost of \$2.5 billion.

State transportation officials have estimated the eventual cost of the Orlando-Miami leg at more than \$8 billion.

Bruce Jay Colan, chairman of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce, said chamber leaders have written a letter to Florida Gov. Charlie Crist and Florida Secretary of Transportation Stephanie Kopelousos urging them to request more money to expedite construction of the Orlando-Miami stretch.

If and when more money is available, the Miami leg would also be built in phases: Orlando to Fort Pierce first, then Fort Pierce to West Palm Beach and finally West Palm Beach to Miami.

A map submitted by the state transportation agency to the Federal Railroad Administration shows there are two possible alignments for the Orlando-Miami route. One would follow Florida's Turnpike and the other Interstate 95.

Regardless of which route is chosen, trains would run from Orlando International Airport to Miami International Airport, with the MIA terminal being the Miami Intermodal Center now under construction just east of the Miami airport.