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Bullet train might get special legislative session

Gov. Charlie Crist hopes lawmakers are close to agreeing on a special session for rail projects, but concerns over new taxes could scuttle the deal.

By Marc Caputo

Gov. Charlie Crist and legislative leaders are discussing a new tax to pay for South and Central Florida rail service in the hopes that federal officials will send billions of dollars to the state for a new bullet train.

Crist said Tuesday that he's "optimistic" legislators can reach a tentative agreement by next week to hold a special lawmaking session on the issue as early as next month.

"If we can show our commitment to rail here in Florida," Crist said, "then we have a much greater opportunity for the bullet-train funds from the federal government."

Senate leaders are considering allowing local governments to impose a new \$2 rental car surcharge. In South Florida, the charge would help pay for Tri-Rail, which officials say is underfunded. In Central Florida, the money could pay for the Orlando-area SunRail.

Crist said lawmakers are still hashing out whether the fee could be imposed by local referendum or county commission vote.

Crist, Senate President Jeff Atwater and others say that such a tax could offer proof to the federal government that Florida is serious about transit, which might help the state qualify for up to \$2.5 billion for a high-speed rail line. The line could ultimately connect SunRail, Tri-Rail and even a new transit line along the Florida East Coast rail corridor in the heart of South Florida's urban areas.

'RISK-FREE' SOURCE

Atwater said federal officials indicated to him that they want "a sustainable and risk-free" revenue source for any rail project.

That might rule out legislation for a referendum, because voters could simply reject the idea.

Atwater's chamber has repeatedly killed SunRail financing; the House has long had the votes to pass the project.

SunRail's main opponent, Republican Sen. Paula Dockery of Lakeland, said the project is too expensive and could unfairly burden taxpayers with liability lawsuits if the private company CSX was at fault in an accident on the tracks.

The state's transportation secretary, Stephanie Kopelousos, said Thursday that CSX was willing to strike a bargain over the liability issue. But the state has yet to have an agreement in writing.

A final complication to any rail deal: Election-year politics.

Legislators and Crist are already feeling heat for raising \$2.2 billion in new fees and taxes this year. Crist, locked in a competitive Republican U.S. Senate primary, has signed a no-new-taxes pledge.

Asked if the \$2 rental surcharge is a tax, Crist said "I'll leave that to others to call it what they want."

The Legislature approved a new surcharge in 2006, only to have Gov. Jeb Bush veto it because it was a new tax.

ALTERNATIVE

The head of the House's Finance and Tax Committee, Fort Lauderdale Republican Rep. Ellyn Bogdanoff, said she would prefer that state lawmakers initially redirect money from an existing \$2 rental-car fee to fund the rail projects.

Then, in 2012, voters could decide whether to raise the new \$2 rental-car tax.

State transportation officials object to the redirection of existing funds -- up to \$100 million -- because they're tied to current projects.