

## **Tri-Rail fund shortfall could end soon**

Lawmakers closed in on winning votes for a special session on high-speed and commuter rail funding. Tri-Rail could be among the beneficiaries.

*By Marc Caputo*

A special lawmaking session on high-speed and commuter rail inched closer Monday as legislative leaders and the governor said they are ready to tap surplus money in the transportation budget rather than raise taxes on rental cars to help pay for the transit projects.

The surplus money -- about \$76 million over the next two years -- should be enough to help fill a hole in South Florida's Tri-Rail system.

Also Monday, opposition to Central Florida's SunRail project started to thaw in the Florida Senate, where the transit system could now be one vote shy of winning passage, according to a Herald/Times vote count.

### **FEDERAL MONEY**

Federal transportation officials have told Florida officials that the state needs to do a better job supporting Tri-Rail and SunRail to increase the state's chances of winning up to \$2.5 billion in federal money for a high-speed rail project.

The federal government has been besieged with requests from various states for high-speed rail money. U.S. Department of Transportation officials said Florida's support for the commuter rail systems is just a "factor" in awarding the grant.

Still, legislative leaders and Gov. Charlie Crist say the state needs to do more for commuter rail. Crist said last week that he wanted to issue a call for a winter special session by Thanksgiving.

"I am anxious to do it," Crist said about the possibility of calling a week-long session, noting lawmakers would already be in Tallahassee for a committee week in December.

"They're going to be up there the week of the seventh anyway," Crist said. "It wouldn't cost us additional money to do it."

But despite Crist's optimism about a special session, he hasn't put much effort into persuading rank-and-file legislators in the Florida Senate where the SunRail project has died for two years. Seven Republican senators who voted against SunRail last year told the Herald/Times that neither Crist nor Senate President Jeff Atwater had called to lobby them for the project.

Crist noted that Senate and House leaders like the idea of using existing surplus tax money to fund Tri-Rail.

During discussions last week, the House balked at a proposal to raise rental car surcharges by \$2. Last week, state economists bailed the Legislature out by estimating that the state would take in more fuel tax money than had been anticipated: \$19 million more this budget year and \$57 million next year. The surplus -- forecast to be \$376 million over a decade -- would provide a long-term solution to some of Tri-Rail's budget woes. Some of the money could also plug a hole in the SunRail budget that lawmakers opened last spring when they raided a state transportation trust fund.

Behind the scenes, rail proponents appear to have 20 votes in favor of SunRail in the Senate. That's up four votes since last spring. But it's one vote shy of securing passage in the 40-member chamber.

### **CHANGED POSITIONS**

Among the switched votes: Democratic leader Al Lawson of Tallahassee and Republican Steve Wise of Jacksonville now say they would vote for the project. Add to that list newly elected Sen. John Thrasher, a Republican who was a chief lobbyist for SunRail last year and replaced SunRail opponent Jim King. And Tony Hill, D-Tallahassee, missed the vote last year but said he was "leaning toward" voting in favor.

Many lawmakers are concerned with the long term cost of SunRail -- up to \$1.2 billion -- as well as the fact that the owner of the rail line, CSX, wanted the state to indemnify it in the case of an accident.

"You could have a CSX conductor high on crack cause a horrible accident and the people of Florida would have to pick up the tab," said Bradenton Republican Sen. Mike Bennett.

Florida's transportation secretary, Stephanie Kopelousos, said CSX is willing to renegotiate and has showed a willingness to pay up to \$10 million in cases of "willful and wanton" negligence. But nothing's in writing yet and it's unclear if that's enough to ease Senate concerns.