

Orlando Sentinel

Tuesday, December 8, 2009

Senate passes SunRail, 27-10

*By Josh Hafenbrack, Dan Tracy and Aaron Deslatte
Posted by Aaron Deslatte*

Once a graveyard for controversial commuter rail projects, the Florida Senate abruptly shifted course Tuesday and voted 27-10 to approve the controversial SunRail project, the 61-mile commuter line that will take shape through Central Florida.

The legislation, now headed to Gov. Charlie Crist for his signature, would lay the groundwork for a future system of bullet trains connecting Florida's traffic-choked urban centers, although that is years off and would require heavy federal funding. And it sends much needed funding to South Florida, where the Tri-Rail commuter train has been hemorrhaging money.

"This is opening a door for us. What is behind the door is still to be determined," said its chief sponsor, Sen. Jeremy Ring, D-Parkland.

Following an 11th-hour deal with labor unions, the Senate pushed through a rail package – which paves the way for the \$1.2 billion SunRail – after just a few hours of debate.

Shortly before the Senate vote, Florida AFL-CIO President Mike Williams issued a statement saying the unions had struck a deal to preserve labor jobs on Tri-Rail and SunRail. That cleared the way for reluctant Senate Democrats to vote for it.

"Our goal of stopping the displacement of federally-qualified railroad workers from Florida's passenger and freight railroads will not be compromised as experienced rail workers will continue to maintain Florida's railways," Williams said.

Not everyone was on board, however. Among the "no" votes was Sen. Nan Rich, D-Weston, who called the bill a bad deal. For the Orlando commuter line, the state is paying CSX \$432 million for 61.5 miles of track and shielding the private company from some lawsuits in the event of a train crash.

"Make no mistake about it, money will be diverted this year and next year for education and health care for this train, because the price will continue to go up and up," Rich said.

Added Sen. Alex Villalobos, R-Miami, also cited the cost in his dissent: "Two months from now, we're going to announce incredible cuts to education and health care. The answer from this senator (to train funding) is 'no.'"

And its fiercest critic, Sen. Paula Dockery, R-Lakeland, said the track was still too expensive and shifted too much risk off of CSX.

“To the people from Orlando, I’m happy you’re getting commuter rail,” Dockery said. “I just tried to re-negotiate it to make it a better deal.”

Other no votes included Sens. Carey Baker, R-Eustis; Charlie Dean, R-Inverness; Arthenia Joyner, D-Tampa; Durrell Peaden, R-Crestview; Gary Siplin, D-Orlando; and Ronda Storms, R-Valrico.

Crist, though, said he was more concerned about all the workers who could be potentially find work along the rail lines.

“My perspective is I want to provide as many jobs for the people of Florida as possible,” Crist said. “That’s what I’m concerned about and that’s what I’m focused on, jobs for the people of the state of Florida regardless of their representation.”