

Friday, December 11, 2009

## **High-speed rail is on fast track**

**OUR OPINION:** Governor, Legislature put rail squarely in Florida's future

Leadership won the day in Tallahassee with Tuesday's passage of the rail funding bill. That leadership will keep Florida in the running for \$2.5 billion in federal stimulus money for a high-speed rail project and create new jobs.

Gov. Charlie Crist, Senate President Jeff Atwater and House Speaker Larry Cretul traversed a field full of landmines to accomplish three things: provide up to \$15 million in extra annual funding for Tri-Rail, jump-start the SunRail commuter rail in the Orlando area by buying 61 miles of track from CSX and show federal transportation officials that Florida is committed to rail in its future mass transit.

Washington got in on the act, too, with Florida Sen. Bill Nelson's announcement Wednesday that Congress had agreed to spend \$40 million on the SunRail project, \$4 million for expansion of Metrorail in Miami and \$1.7 million toward a light-rail system in Tampa. Early next year, the feds will announce which states will get the federal stimulus grants for rail projects. Florida is seeking \$2.5 billion to build a high-speed rail line from Tampa to Orlando and begin environmental work to extend it to Miami.

Deals were struck, of course, to get the rail bill passed. Senate Democrats were brought on board when the governor agreed to protect the jobs of eight unionized railroad workers in Orlando. More important, a state agreement with CSX that makes state taxpayers liable for the railroad employees' negligence on the SunRail line was modified in the state's favor.

Thanks to focused leadership and wise compromises, Tri-Rail will keep running more trains during rush hours. SunRail will double the state's commuter rail lines. And the bullet train's chances are looking very good.