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Gov. Crist signs rail bill in 4 cities

By Tamara Lush

Governor Charlie Crist signed a rail legislation bill Wednesday, clearing the way for commuter and transit rail systems in central Florida.

Crist and other lawmakers hope the new measure will also mean thousands of new jobs and \$2.6 billion in federal stimulus money for a high-speed line between Orlando and Tampa, which may be expanded to Miami in the future.

“Jobs, jobs, jobs” Crist said during a public bill signing at a bus stop in downtown Tampa, where a rail station may eventually be built. “That’s what it’s really all about.”

If all goes as planned, travelers will be able ride between Orlando and Tampa on a high-speed train.

The proposed SunRail commuter line in the Orlando area had been on hold pending passage of the law at a special legislative session earlier this month. The Florida Senate twice before had rejected similar legislation sought by SunRail backers.

During that weeklong session, debate focused on liability coverage needed to create the SunRail commuter system in central Florida and possibly others.

Other provisions will create two new state entities to plan and oversee passenger rail systems across Florida and shift \$60 million to rail projects from other transportation spending starting in 2014.

The bill also increases the state’s present \$27 million annual subsidy for the financially troubled Tri-Rail commuter line in South Florida by up to \$15 million.

Opponents said SunRail would cost too much and the liability provisions would leave taxpayers on the hook for accidents caused by freight hauler CSX, which would share the track. The state plans to purchase 61.5 miles of track for \$432 million from CSX for SunRail in the Orlando area.

Less than an hour after Crist signed the bill in Tampa, State Sen. Paula Dockery, R-Lakeland, voiced her continued opposition.

“The rail legislation signed today by Governor Charlie Crist might be good for Florida if only its hopelessly optimistic claims were true,” she wrote in an e-mail to reporters. “What this legislation really does is pay the highest price ever paid for a rail line, while creating yet another Wall Street subsidy that sticks Main Street businesses with the bill.”

A handful of protesters also showed up at the Tampa bill signing, criticizing the rail bill as wasteful.

Crist, who had also signed the bill in Tallahassee earlier Wednesday, was scheduled to make similar stops to tout the rail project in Orlando and Fort Lauderdale.