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With dedicated funding stream, Tri-Rail may also see added service

By Risa Polansky

After a special legislative session that last week scored Tri-Rail a long-sought dedicated funding stream, the South Florida regional commuter line not only lives — riders may also see expanded service.

Just this spring, halving weekday service and cutting weekend trains seemed imminent, with a full system shutdown feared within 18 months.

Tri-Rail's board swerved from that train wreck, deciding at the last minute to move capital dollars to the operations side of the budget, maintaining full service at least for the year.

Pushing for a dedicated funding source to keep the system alive has been ongoing for two decades, but it truly gained steam this year, when it seemed Florida would lose out on federal funds for high-speed rail if it didn't support its own regional transit systems.

The legislature convened in Tallahassee last week to put its rail money where its mouth is, dedicating funding for Tri-Rail and getting wheels turning on SunRail, a planned Central Florida commuter line.

Tri-Rail is to get at least \$13.3 million a year from the state's transportation trust fund — enough to not only operate but potentially enhance service, said Joe Giulietti, executive director of the South Florida Regional Transportation Authority, which runs Tri-Rail.

That may come in the form of extended weekend hours and perhaps eventually more weekday service, he said.

“We're taking a look at that.”

Staffers are assessing capacity and working on possibilities to share with the governing board, which would make the final call.

Board Chair Jeff Koons, a Palm Beach commissioner, and Vice Chair Bruno Barreiro, a Miami-Dade commissioner, did not return multiple calls.

Asked whether the new funding came with any cons, Mr. Giulietti said he could cite, if any, only a “guarded negative”: proponents had hoped for enough funding to not only cover operations but also contribute to capital improvements.

“We have to continue to work on that,” he said.

The proposal on the table ahead of the new transportation trust funding setup — an added \$2 on the state's rental car surcharge — would have meant another \$20 million to \$25 million to invest in capital programs.

But it seems there will be other opportunities to make up for it in some form, Mr. Giulietti said, as Florida officials “want to start funding rail projects throughout the state.”

And as far as operations, Tri-Rail's promised \$13.3 million from the state transportation trust would jump to \$15 million if it took over dispatching trains on the corridor, which transportation service company CSX does now.

And earmarking money from the state trust fund won't eat into other planned projects around Florida, Mr. Giulietti said.

Higher-than-anticipated revenues, mainly gas taxes, have padded the state fund, he said, and “there's more than enough in the additional gas tax revenues to absorb this. This does not affect FDOT's [the transportation department's] work program.”