



News Clip

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Leaders betting lots on upcoming SunRail launch

By Kyle Hightower

Associated Press,

ORLANDO, Fla. -- Central Florida will embark this spring on one of its largest mass transportation experiments when service begins on the first 32-mile phase of the \$1.2 billion SunRail commuter train, an effort to ease nightmarish traffic and protect the region's long-term economic health.

Currently, tens of thousands of commuters and tourists cram a few main highways and roads in the popular, fast-growing area. The first phase — 12 stations from Debarry in Volusia County through downtown Orlando to Sand Lake Road in Orange County — will be the ultimate viability test case for an area that has never had this kind of transportation alternative before. And with promised federal money for the second phase suspended in Washington budget limbo, the success or failure of SunRail's initial stage will garner an even brighter spotlight.

"This is a dramatic evolution step for central Florida. It's the first time we're building a fixed transit system — a regional one — with the ability of being able to connect into high-speed (rail)," said U.S. Rep. John Mica, a Republican from Winter Park and a member of the House Transportation Committee.

Florida Gov. Rick Scott rejected more than \$2 billion in federal high-speed rail funding in 2011 that would have connected Tampa and Orlando. But after some hesitation, he eventually approved a deal that opened construction for SunRail after being sold on its jobs creation benefits and potential to reduce congestion on Interstate 4, the region's main east-west highway. But now federal budget cuts have cast at least some doubt on whether another \$80 million in funding will be there for the on-time construction of Phase 2, which will extend the rail line farther north into Volusia County and south into Osceola County. When completed, it would stretch the rail to 17 stations and 62 miles.

Construction for the next phase was scheduled to begin next summer, but there are currently no guarantees SunRail will be included in the 2014 federal transportation budget.

It's caused lobbying efforts to intensify locally and in Washington, with opinions differing about what will happen.

"I know a lot of local business leaders went to D.C. to make the point about trying to make sure to continue to help build it, and get the momentum going," Florida Transportation Secretary Ananth Prasad said. "I think ultimately that's needed. We need that federal budget certainty ... and I know everybody is working hard to get there."

U.S. Rep. Corrine Brown, a Democrat who serves alongside Mica on the transportation committee, said in a statement last month that not having a 2014 transportation budget and the potential for an additional \$100 million in cuts next year "has brought a high level of uncertainty and a limitation on the ability to fund new transit projects."

But she added she had spoken to Federal Transit Administrator Peter Rogoff about SunRail's importance and would also reach out to President Barack Obama.

Mica said Phase 2 will have the system's highest ridership, according to projections, and he expects that the expansion will be looked upon favorably with Phase 1 nearly complete.

"I hope it's in the president's budget. If not, there are alternatives ... to continue the work," he said.

Mica said one of those is spreading the project out over the next two fiscal years, though that could affect construction plans. Either way, he said, he believes it will move forward.

Optimism also runs high in the affected communities, where growth makes alternative transportation attractive.

MetroPlan Orlando, a regional planning organization, projects that the three-county metro area of Orange, Seminole and Osceola will grow more than 70 percent by 2030. Using the 2012 census estimate of 2.1 million people, that would mean an increase to more than 3.5 million. Also, according to census data, over the past 12 years the largest population growth in central Florida has been in Sanford, Winter Garden, south Orlando and Kissimmee.

While the 18-to-35-year-old demographic is migrating toward urban city centers, there are segments that are working and residing in surrounding counties.

It's why convincing a chunk of that group to ride SunRail during the initial rollout has been a focus.

Seminole County Commission chairman Bob Dallari called SunRail "a game changer."

"SunRail is getting attention from a lot of folks," he said. "And the younger population wants to be able to live places where they don't have to be dependent upon automobiles."

Since 2012, the state transportation department has been having "lunch and learn" sessions to reach out to businesses to tap those prospective riders.

The Orlando Regional Chamber of Commerce also got a grant to promote the train and explain why employers should encourage their workers to ride it.

There has also been a push to bring retail and residential options close to stations.

Prasad said there are 15 projects within a 10-minute walk of the initial stations with a close to \$800 million construction value. He said that included about 3,700 new residential units around the stations and new hotel projects.

"It's the perfect scenario for SunRail to have a chance," Prasad said.

There are concerns along the initial route for some residents, though.

Christine Watkins, 63 and president of the South Seminole Community Association for Progress, resides in a predominantly black community in East Altamonte, about 2 miles from the SunRail station there. She said that while many in her neighborhood welcome new, accessible alternatives for those who are without transportation, there are concerns.

The loudest are from residents that fear they could eventually be encouraged to move to other areas to make way for development near the station. That is something that happened in the historically black Hannibal Square district in Winter Park years ago.

"We don't want that to happen here," she said.

Dallari said those concerns in Seminole haven't been ignored — the county commissioners paid for a study to look at the kind of projects that could go up without displacing many people.

Still, Watkins plans to ride.

"Personally, I'm excited about it because of the great location I am in, and I plan to live here for the duration," she said. "You name it, we're right there in the middle of it. I've had some other people in my age group who are saying as long as our taxes aren't through the roof, we're for it."