



February 05, 2009

It's full speed ahead for SunRail system

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TALLAHASSEE -- The political momentum for a Central Florida commuter-rail system appears to be building.

Flanked by key state officials and Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer, Gov. Charlie Crist rallied support Wednesday for the 61-mile SunRail system that would link Volusia and three other counties.

Crist said little publicly last year when lawmakers killed a controversial bill needed to move forward with the system. But Wednesday, with lawmakers poised to take up another version, he asked, "Who could be against SunRail?"

"This time, we're going to make it go," he said.

Crist and others said the project will spur economic development and help ease traffic congestion.

"We keep talking about the economy," said Volusia County Chairman Frank Bruno, who attended Crist's news conference at the Capitol. "This will sure fire up our economy."

But opponents say the project will cost too much and be a sweetheart deal for the freight company CSX Transportation, which will sell tracks for the commuter-rail system and also receive money to upgrade lines in other parts of the state.

Commuter-rail costs are estimated at \$615 million, with federal, state and local governments combining to pay for it. The CSX-related parts of the deal would cost an additional \$491 million.

Rich Templin, a spokesman for the Florida AFL-CIO, said a lot of the expenses are "simply a giveaway to CSX to improve their freight system."

"This is a really, really bad deal," said Templin, whose organization opposes the deal, in part, because it could lead to nonunion labor working on the commuter system.

Volusia County government and business leaders have made lobbying for the commuter-rail system a top priority as the annual legislative session gets ready to start March 3.

The system ultimately would link DeLand with Poinciana in Osceola County, bringing commuters in and out of downtown Orlando.

While efforts to pass a bill failed last year, project supporters have political muscle in the House and Senate in 2009 -- and also have made a major change to reduce opposition.

Transportation Chairman Andy Gardiner, R-Orlando, and Judiciary Chairman Lee Constantine, R-Altamonte Springs, filed the bill this week in the Senate. Both lead committees that likely will play important roles in pushing ahead with the plan.

Meanwhile, Rep. Dean Cannon, a Winter Park Republican who is slated to become House speaker in 2010, will spearhead the issue in the House.

This year's bill eliminates a controversial provision that would have shielded private contractors from legal liability if they caused accidents on the commuter line. The state plans to contract with private companies to operate the system.

That change ended opposition from the state's powerful trial lawyers, who argued contractors should be held liable if they are at fault.

"They would be operating the railroad but not (be) responsible for anything that went wrong," said Paul Jess, general counsel for the Florida Justice Association, a trial-lawyers group.

But the bill still will face opposition from unions and critics such as state Sen. Paula Dockery, R-Lakeland, who helped lead the fight against last year's proposal.

Dockery and some other Polk County officials are worried about increased freight traffic in Lakeland that would result from changes made by CSX.

She sent a letter to Crist on Monday asking that he renegotiate the deal with CSX and saying the project has "all the makings of a white elephant that could actually harm Florida's efforts to create meaningful routes for passenger rail."

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