



Monday, Jun. 22, 2009

## U.S. Stimulus Puts Bullet Trains On the Fast Track

By Tim Padgett / Miami

Florida, like many of America's biggest states, can be frustrating to traverse. Driving between such major cities as Miami and Tampa is a back-numbing haul; flying between them, especially at the exorbitant fares many airlines charge, often seems impractical. And as the peninsula state's population has exploded in recent years — it's set to pass New York as the nation's third-largest — its road and air corridors have become more gridlocked and eco-unfriendly. Which is why Floridians voted in 2000 to build high-speed bullet train service between Miami, Tampa and Orlando. By 2004, however, then Governor Jeb Bush, who had insisted the \$6 billion estimated cost would in reality top \$20 billion, convinced Florida voters to drop the idea.

But the bullet-train idea is back, as it is throughout the rest of the country, thanks to [\\$13 billion for high-speed rail \(HSR\) that was tucked into President Obama's \\$787 billion economic stimulus package](#). The application process for bullet-train bucks (\$8 billion this year and \$1 billion each of the next five years) began this week. States like Florida are vying for big chunks of it — not only as free funding for a traffic decongestant they thought they couldn't afford, but as a high-tech pump-primer for the kind of higher-wage jobs that low-wage economies like Florida's need. Current Florida Governor Charlie Crist, who has angered conservatives in his Republican Party by embracing Obama's overall stimulus program — and who has reversed much of Jeb Bush's anti-government agenda — said recently that rail projects like HSR are "critical because we're still a growth state. Any of these transportation alternatives are good for Florida and good for jobs." ([Read about Japan's high-speed trains.](#))

One of the key ideas fueling HSR is that the U.S. in the 21st century has grown beyond a country of cities and suburbs to what urban studies expert Richard Florida calls "mega-regions." Central Florida's I-4 Corridor, between Orlando and Tampa, is a prime example. Mega-regions "are natural economic agglomerations whose market potential can be harnessed if they're linked up by high-speed rail," says Florida, director of the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto. "If there's any place in the world

right now where this makes sense, it's the U.S. Cars and jets won't do it; high-speed rail will."

The Obama Administration has identified 10 major regional corridors for HSR funding. They include three in the heavily populated Northeast (where the quasi-high-speed Acela train is already in use), then the Southeast coast, Florida, the upper Gulf Coast, the Midwest (dubbed the "Chicago Hub"), Texas ("South Central"), the Pacific Northwest and California. Of those, U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood has pointed to California and Florida as being "way ahead of the curve" in terms of preparing for HSR. Florida, for example, already did most of the spade work, including land acquisition and environmental-impact and ridership studies, before Bush quashed its first HSR effort five years ago. Californians have approved a \$9 billion bond issue to finance an ambitious 800-mile network that could ultimately cost as much as \$45 billion and would not only zip passengers between Los Angeles and San Francisco in less than three hours, but would ferry them Sacramento and San Diego as well.

But Florida, like the national bellwether it's become this decade, could also serve as a gauge for HSR's political viability. While Crist has directed his transportation officials to apply for the funds, he hasn't exactly played the ebullient cheerleader he's famous for being on issues like alternative energy. That's largely because he knows a chorus of voices in Florida and the rest of the nation still fears that bullet trains, despite the federal largesse, will turn out to be a white elephant whose costs have been lavishly underestimated by the Obama Administration. Even the Orlando *Sentinel*, which covers a city that would absorb a large share of the \$1.5 billion Florida will seek to help fund a \$2.5 billion Orlando-Tampa HSR line, warned in a recent editorial that the Sunshine State is "really not a strong candidate for high-speed rail." The reason: its local commuter train lines — which HSR would need to link up with to make it truly practical — are virtually non-existent thanks to the peninsula's car-obsessed culture.

Still, despite the questions about Florida's long-term commitment to HSR, Vice President Joe Biden this month assured the state that it's "in play" for the stimulus money. Either way, Florida is a strong reminder that the passenger rail debate isn't likely to go away. Liberals tend to romanticize trains (because the French use them) and conservatives tend to disparage them (because the French use them). But while the U.S. probably can't recreate the charming ride from Paris to Lyon, it also can't keep treating rail like a loathsome relic. Since World War II, the U.S. has poured almost \$2 trillion into highway and aviation systems, while passenger rail — like the wheezing federal Amtrak line — has received less than 3% of Washington's transportation dollars. Obama argues the U.S. needs, economically and environmentally, a rail revival in order to relieve stressed auto and air infrastructure. That means emulating the long-established high-speed (more than 110 mph or 177 kph) passenger rail systems in Europe and Asia.

Florida's HSR boosters say its rail project could create as many as 20,000 jobs. In addition to the \$1.5 billion in stimulus money to fund the 100-mile-long Orlando-Tampa line, which will likely use the more eco-friendly electric TGV trains popular in Europe, Florida will look for \$1 billion from the private sector, which will operate it. The Florida

High Speed Rail Authority predicts the line would be profitable: even with one-way fares of less than \$20, say its studies, it would generate up to \$42 million a year from an annual ridership of almost 3 million (or 4 million if tourists are included) versus up to \$36 million in operating costs. As for the state's inability to provide commuter lines to complement HSR, Authority Chairman Lee Chira calls it a chicken-and-egg debate: establishing one kind of line, he insists, "will lead to building the other. Since federal dollars are paying for the high-speed, doing this first is a no-brainer for us."

More important, says Florida Congresswoman Kathy Castor of Tampa, HSR can enhance Florida's old economy, tourism, while helping lay a foundation for a new one. "So many visitors to Disney World would also like to hop on high-speed rail and enjoy our beaches," says Castor. "But the I-4 Corridor is also vital to our economic future, and high-speed rail is a high-tech project. I see it as a linchpin of Florida's reinvention."

But many opponents see it as financial quicksand, certain the Orlando-Tampa high-speed line will end up costing much more than \$2.5 billion. Still, free billions from Washington during a crippling recession are hard to pass up. Florida's bullet, as a result, may well be a train that's already left the station.