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Florida's high-speed rail gets 'down payment'

The \$1.25 billion the Obama administration is giving Florida for high-speed rail is not enough to complete the Tampa-Orlando stretch or advance the Miami leg -- but project supporters believe Washington will supply more money later.

By Alfonso Chardy and Marc Caputo

When Florida asked the Obama administration last year for money to build a high-speed rail line, it requested \$2.5 billion for a Tampa-Orlando stretch and \$30 million to advance the Orlando-Miami leg.

But Thursday, when President Obama came to Tampa, he announced Florida would receive \$1.25 billion for the project -- not enough for the full Tampa-Orlando phase and nothing for the Miami portion.

High-speed rail advocates celebrated, calling the money a "down payment" for the long-sought project. But skeptics said the federal grant will do little or nothing to solve Florida's traffic problems and will add to the state's budget woes.

State transportation officials were unable to say how much of the 84-mile Tampa-Orlando stretch they can actually build with the money. And they don't know when -- or if -- they can begin work on the Miami leg.

Bob Poole, transportation policy director at the libertarian Reason Foundation, wondered how Florida will get the additional money to complete the Tampa-Orlando segment.

"Somehow Florida would have to find the extra money," he said, "and the state budget has more than a \$1 billion deficit next year."

Kevin Thibault, a senior Florida Department of Transportation official in charge of the high-speed rail program, said he expects to hear from the Federal Railroad Administration in the next few days when the money will be distributed and how it can be spent. The Florida Rail Enterprise, a new office within FDOT, will run the state's high-speed rail project. Thibault, interim executive director of Florida Rail Enterprise, said the federal money won't be enough to complete the Tampa-Orlando phase -- unless federal officials offer more funds in the future.

According to documents FDOT submitted to the Federal Railroad Administration, if Florida had received all the funds, contracts could be signed within months. Construction jobs, however, would not start for at least another year because work would not begin until 2011.

Now, Thibault said, he's not sure when work will begin on the Tampa-Orlando segment. And the longer Orlando-Miami leg -- about 225 miles at a cost of more than \$8 billion -- is in limbo.

FDOT had requested \$30 million to conduct a new environmental impact study and more engineering work for the Orlando-Miami stretch.

Using state money to cover the shortfall in the federal grant is an unlikely prospect, skeptics said.

Bob Burleson, president of the Florida Transportation Builders Association, said he doesn't see much willingness from the Legislature to raise new revenue to build and maintain a rail system. State money for transportation projects was cut this budget year.

"It's not a zero-sum game. It's worse than that," Burleson said. "There is an ever-decreasing pool of money. And if they take money, it will be from a significant project and the people will scream."

High-speed rail advocates, however, were enthusiastic -- though some were crestfallen Miami was not included.

"While I'm somewhat disappointed that we didn't get a portion of the \$30 million for Miami-Orlando, it's still a relatively small amount compared to the \$1.2 billion the state is, in fact, receiving for Tampa-Orlando," said Bruce Jay Colan, chairman of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce and a partner at the law firm of Holland & Knight.

Others said the money is a turning point for Florida.

"It opens a new transportation era," said Eugene Skoropowski, project director for Florida Overland eXpress, the prior Florida high-speed rail effort that then-Gov. Jeb Bush derailed in 1999.

Bush halted that project after concluding the state's chances of securing a \$2 billion federal loan for the project were dubious. Later, studies indicated the project's ridership estimates were overly optimistic.

In an interview on NBC's Today Show Thursday, Bush indicated the new project will work only if the federal government is realistic about ridership projections.

"If it's high-speed rail and there's support for it and the federal government is going to take the ridership risk, it would be a good thing," Bush said. Advocates predicted the federal government will come up with the additional money.

"This amount of money is more than enough funding to commence planning, design and construction for the Tampa-Orlando corridor," said Al Maloof, a Miami-Dade Expressway Authority member and a strong South Florida advocate of high-speed rail.