

State, local leaders told to get it together for high-speed rail

BY RISA POLANSKY

State and local leaders say they want high-speed rail.

Prove it, says US Rep. Corrine Brown, chair of the House Transportation Subcommittee on Railroads, Pipelines and Hazardous Materials.

Leaders around Florida talk the talk, she said. But "when it comes to action, you leave us wanting... You say you support the program, but when we need your legislation, when we need your [financial] match, it's not there."

If Florida is after fast rail — and local leaders are, namely a Miami-Orlando link — there must be regional and local infrastructure to complement it, Ms. Brown told transportation stakeholders at a Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce roundtable last week.

"It can't be like a bridge to nowhere... It just doesn't stand alone."

And to even have a shot at federal dollars, those area systems have to be well-supported when it comes to state and local funding, she said.

The congresswoman would know.

Ms. Brown, whose district covers Orlando, Jacksonville and Gainesville, has served on the Transportation Committee in Washington for 17 years and before that on the state legislature's Transportation Committee for 10.

"I hope we all understand — this is a call to action" she told the crowd, which included in addition to private sector players and chamber officials leaders such as Tom Gustafson, director of government and transportation policy for Florida International University's Lehman Center for Transportation Research and a former speaker of the Florida House; Miami-Dade Expressway Authority Executive Director Javier Rodriguez; Albert Hernandez, a Miami-Dade Transit assistant director; Port of Miami Director Bill Johnson; and Joseph Giuliatti and Jeff Koons, the executive director and chair of the South Florida

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Regional Transportation authority, which operates Tri-Rail, South Florida's tri-county commuter rail system.

Tri-Rail is Exhibit A, Ms. Brown said.

"We need a dedicated source of revenue."

The federal government over the years has poured hundreds of billions into the South Florida system — \$256 million alone for its 2006 double-tracking project.

But year after year, attempts to pin down a dedicated state funding stream die in the legislature, including during the most recent session, when Tri-Rail faced drastic service cuts without the money.

With that kind of track record, "it's really tough for us to go to Washington," regional transportation authority Chair Mr. Koons said.

The authority, funded by local and state appropriations, used capital improvement funds as a stopgap, saving the service for now.

But that's no way to show that the state cares about rail, Ms. Brown said in an interview after the roundtable.

"What kind of message does it send if Tri-Rail collapses?"

There may soon be another shot to pass an added \$2 rental car surcharge to support re-

gional transportation authorities across the state if the legislature calls a special session on gambling, which some insiders predict.

There, state leaders must support Tri-Rail and Central Florida's proposed commuter rail system to have a shot at high-speed rail, said Mr. Gustafson, the Lehman Center official and former legislator.

"Dade County has a lot at stake here... If we do not get ourselves together in Florida, we get embarrassed in Washington."

Rep. Brown said the same.

The feds aren't just going to hand high-speed rail funding to anyone who asks, she stressed during her address to transportation leaders.

The federal stimulus package includes \$8 billion for high-speed rail — and there have been \$105 billion in requests, Ms. Brown said.

Some states, such as California, are putting money where their mouths are.

There, voters in 2008 committed to bond out \$10 billion to support a fast-rail project.

Here, there's been no recent solid effort to unite residents or elected leaders in support.

And when it comes to spending federal stimulus funds the government has already doled out for other projects, Florida ranks 51 of 50, counting Washington, DC.

"I'm very pissed about this," Ms. Brown said, lamenting a bottleneck in Tallahassee.

She asked local leaders to call state officials "and tell them to get on the stick."

If not, money for high-speed rail is going to go elsewhere faster than a bullet train.

"Let's be serious, Florida," Ms. Brown said. "If you do not come to the table... then the money should go somewhere else."

And "that's the way it should be," she said, though she'd like to see her home state boast the first high-speed rail system in the US. "So the question is, what are you going to do?"

The chamber has taken "a



Photo by Mariene Cuaroni

Humberto Alonso, shown at the Greater Miami Chamber goals conference in May, says local leaders now have a 'call to action.'

very proactive approach," said Humberto Alonso, chamber transportation and infrastructure chair.

The business group, along with local government officials, hit the hill in Washington this summer to meet with Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood and other federal bigwigs.

Mr. Alonso, of engineering firm PBS&J, also met recently with leaders in Jacksonville to talk strategy.

Now, he said, "we need to have a call to action."

He encouraged roundtable attendees to leverage connections and relationships to spread the message.

The chamber plans to distribute example letters to encourage members to reach out.

And the transportation committee is to meet Sept. 14 to talk legislative strategy.

"Clearly, clearly, the cork in the bottle right now is the state," chamber Chair Bruce Jay Colan

of Holland & Knight law firm said.

Ms. Brown said in the interview that local business players seem to get the picture.

"The business community — they're at the table," Ms. Brown said. "I'm convinced they understand what it [high-speed rail] would do for economic development."

They just need to use that understanding to mobilize lawmakers, she said.

On the local government side, Miami-Dade commissioners last week passed a resolution supporting high-speed rail, which Chairman Dennis Moss hand delivered to Rep. Brown during her Miami visit.

It's a start, she said. But now's the time to take the push into overdrive.

"Everybody's excited about high-speed rail, but we need to make sure all of our stakeholders are at the same place at the same time."