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Business community may hold key to Tri-Rail funding

BY RISA POLANSKY

The business community could be just the ticket as Tri-Rail proponents continue a years-long push to secure a dedicated revenue stream for the regional commuter line, one board member says.

In the end, it's up to state legislators to set a funding source for Tri-Rail.

But businesspeople often have ins with lawmakers.

And if anyone understands the economic importance of maintaining and growing public transportation – and the need for a viable, long-term plan to do it – it's the business community, said James Cummings, South Florida Regional Transportation Authority board member and retired head of construction firm James A. Cummings Inc.

Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties fund Tri-Rail, which runs through all three jurisdictions.

The state matches county contributions.

But in the face of plummeting revenues, the counties have had to slash Tri-Rail funding – reducing also the state match.

To continue running, the commuter line needs a dedicated source of revenue, proponents say.

Last legislative session, the proposed source came before lawmakers in the form of a \$2 rental car surcharge tacked onto a bill for SunRail, a proposed Orlando-area rail line.

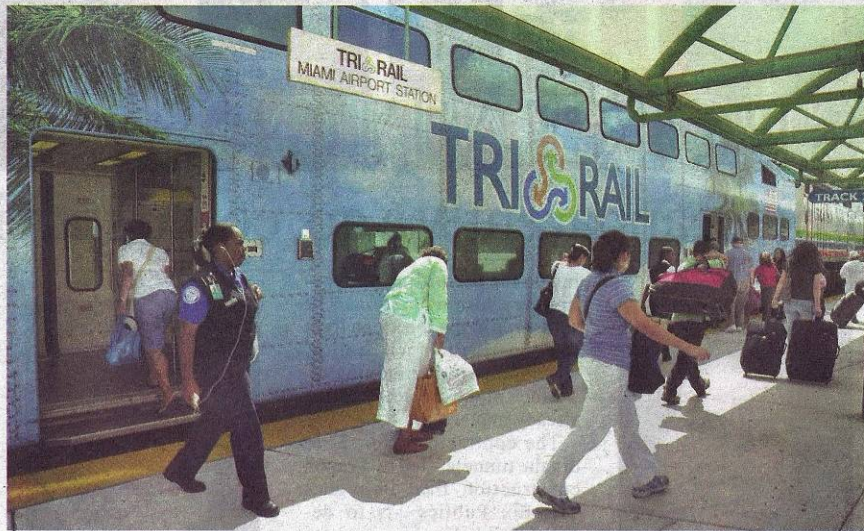


Photo by Maxine Usdan

Tri-Rail will need a dedicated source of revenue to keep running, as existing funds are severely short.

It died.

But that measure was no good anyway, Mr. Cummings said.

Had the state passed it, imposing the charge would have required a supermajority vote by the three South Florida counties' commissions.

Then, a 2010 referendum would have allowed voters to decide whether to ratify or kill the fee.

That plan not only would have put off the funding issue for a year, but even then it could have died in the hands of voters, he said.

Next go-round, the idea is to propose a standalone bill calling

for the \$2 rental car surcharge, with proceeds to go directly to regional transportation authorities across Florida.

Proponents are working to join forces with leaders around the state to conduct the push.

Mr. Cummings has his eye on the business communities.

"You educate the businesspeople with the facts... they will stand up and I think do what's right for Florida irrespective of politics, and that's what I'm banking on," he said.

The idea is to arm business leaders with the facts – including the roadblocks built into the

last piece of failed legislation – "and let them go to their legislators and say, 'Look, let's straighten this out.'"

And it's not only Tri-Rail on the line, Mr. Cummings stressed.

Federal officials including US Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood have made it clear Florida has no shot at funding for high-speed rail if it doesn't support existing transit, such as Tri-Rail, and foster other local and regional transportation systems, like SunRail.

"I'm reaching out to the business community in Orlando," he

said. "I want to reach out to the business community in Tampa, as well as the Dade, Broward, Palm Beach business communities, as well as our legislators."

It's businesspeople who "understand the reality of what we would be losing," Mr. Cummings said. "They may not vote, but you look at who contributes a lot of money [to politicians] – it's the business community."

Local business leaders have rallied behind the cause.

"We're doing everything we can to try to support Tri-Rail and a dedicated funding source for their operations," said Humberto P. Alonso Jr., chair of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce's Transportation and Infrastructure Committee and vice president and South Florida district director for engineering firm PBS&J.

The chamber has also become an active advocate for a high-speed rail link between Miami and Orlando.

The federal government "views all of these systems as complementary," Mr. Alonso acknowledged, and officials have sent a clear message: "If you don't support Tri-Rail and you don't support things like SunRail, you're not going to get any high speed rail money...."

The chamber has been talking to members of the Legislature, and we're continuing to strategize and to reach out through our advocacy committee."