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South Florida's Tri-Rail service counting on legislators

By Alfonso Chardy

The Tri-Rail station east of Miami International Airport is a symbol of the beleaguered commuter rail's potential bright future — if state officials meeting in Tallahassee this week give it a guaranteed subsidy.

The station is one of Tri-Rail's busiest, built at the site of a future transit hub and serving air travelers and commuters from Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties.

But Tri-Rail — launched 20 years ago as a temporary service while Interstate 95 was widened — has grown into a heavily subsidized system with a small number of loyal riders who rely on the tri-county service.

And it now faces possible shutdown unless the state Legislature gives it permanent funding, a key element of the debate in the special lawmaking session on transit starting Thursday.

“Shutting down Tri-Rail would hurt a lot of people,” said Norma Delgado, a 76-year-old retired bank employee who rode the train Wednesday from the airport station to a family reunion in Palm Beach. “It helps so many people who depend on it, especially with the recent surge in gas prices.”

Among the key transit proposals under consideration in Tallahassee: Giving Tri-Rail a guaranteed source of income to avoid recurring budget shortfalls, approving construction of a similar commuter rail service known as SunRail in Central Florida and creating an agency to oversee a possible bullet train.

Lawmakers called the special session to quell fears that Florida could lose \$2.53 billion in federal stimulus money for a high-speed rail system if it does not show financial support for Tri-Rail and SunRail.

Florida would use most of the money — \$2.5 billion — to build the first phase of the high-speed rail project between Tampa and Orlando. The remainder would be used to pay for design work to extend the high speed rail line from Orlando to Miami, where it would terminate at the new transit hub.

The proposal for Tri-Rail now under consideration in Tallahassee would deliver up to \$15 million yearly from a trust fund.

Jeff Koons, a Palm Beach County Commissioner and Tri-Rail chairman, said the amount will help but is not a long-term solution.

“It's a quick fix that will get us through for a few years, but they need to do more,” Koons said. “But at least it's recognition of the importance of passenger rail and symbolic support for rail transit.”

A stable subsidy would enable Tri-Rail to join the multiple transportation services to be offered at the \$1.7 billion Miami Intermodal Center, or MIC. The MIC would serve as a transit hub offering Tri-Rail, Amtrak, Greyhound buses, county Metrorail and buses. An automated people mover would link the hub to the airport.

Some officials are convinced that the MIC, set to open in 2012, will increase Tri-Rail's chances of survival — especially if the Legislature approves guaranteed funding.

“Once the MIC is built ... Tri-Rail's ridership will increase dramatically,” predicted Koons. “That's part of the future of Tri-Rail, the millions of passengers who annually use MIA, many from Europe and Asia, where they have very sophisticated intermodal systems.”

Tri-Rail ridership surged to about 15,000 passengers per day when gas prices spiked to about \$4 per gallon last year but ridership has now dwindled to about 13,000 a day following a 25 percent fare increase in June, among other reasons.

If the special session fails to fund Tri-Rail, officials may fall back on a plan the Tri-Rail board approved in May to reduce service drastically: 30 trains a day instead of 50 and no weekend or holiday service. Service could end completely by 2011.

The board approved the plan after lawmakers rejected a previous plan to build SunRail and fund Tri-Rail.

Service cutbacks were delayed in June when the Tri-Rail board agreed to allow managers to dip into equipment improvement reserves and federal stimulus money to continue operations at current levels — at least for another year.

The alternative was seen as a stopgap solution while Tri-Rail officials lobbied for a special session to finally obtain dedicated funding.

Tri-Rail's annual budget is about \$47 million. Almost half comes from contributions from Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties, which have been reduced in the last year. The rest comes from fares, the Florida Department of Transportation and the federal government.