

Candidate Marco Rubio takes middle road on Florida rail projects

By Adam C. Smith

As speaker of the Florida House, Marco Rubio voted for a controversial SunRail commuter rail project and published a book of policy ideas touting investments in rail, highways and transit as huge job creators.

But now that he's a Republican U.S. Senate candidate, Rubio won't give a clear answer on the biggest policy debate of the day: Should lawmakers approve the billion-dollar package of rail projects under debate in a special legislative session?

“Back then it made sense from an economic perspective. Now we're living in a much different time, so it's a new cost-benefit analysis,” Rubio said Monday when pressed to take a stance. “Everything is done in the context of the moments in which you're living.”

It was the latest case of Rubio's public record as a legislator bumping awkwardly against his campaign persona as the true-blue conservative alternative to Gov. Charlie Crist, his rival for the GOP Senate nomination.

“While Marco Rubio hedges his bets on SunRail, Gov. Crist and the Florida Legislature are focused on creating much-needed jobs in Central Florida,” said Andrea Saul, spokeswoman for the Crist campaign. “Florida deserves leaders who will fight to create jobs for Floridians, not those who will turn their backs during these challenging economic times.”

The SunRail debate is particularly dicey for Rubio.

To come out firmly against the commuter rail project is to risk being accused of flip-flopping, after having supported a similar proposal two years earlier. And he could antagonize a host of business groups. In Tampa Bay alone, economic development groups pushing for support of rail funding include the Greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce, Manatee Chamber of Commerce, Tampa Bay Partnership, Westshore Alliance, Greater Clearwater Chamber of Commerce, Pinellas Realtor Association, NAIOP Tampa Bay, Tampa Bay Builders and the Brandon Chamber of Commerce.

But to support the rail project as he did before would put Rubio on the same side as Gov. Crist - embracing a big government spending project and eagerly positioning Florida to grab billions more in federal stimulus money. Plus, some of the anti-tax “tea party” protesters backing Rubio's insurgent campaign are vocal opponents of these rail projects.

So Rubio is straddling the mushy middle. The rail projects may or may not be good for Florida in the current economic climate, he says, but Crist exaggerates how many jobs are likely to be created and the state should avoid becoming too dependent on federal stimulus money.

Asked about the argument by gubernatorial candidate and state Sen. Paula Dockery, R-Lakeland, that the SunRail deal- both in its current form and the earlier one supported by Rubio - is little more than a massive giveaway to the CSX rail corporation, the Miami Republican sidestepped.

“That's an issue with the individual company involved in the right of way,” Rubio said. “My issue has always been about the rail component of it and the transportation. By and large as a transportation program, rail is a positive for Florida but it has to meet a cost-benefit analysis that makes sense for our people.”

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