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Florida rail expansion bill signed into law

By Steve Bousquet and Janet Zink

Gov. Charlie Crist signed the rail bill into law Wednesday morning at ceremonies in Tallahassee and Tampa.

Crist gathered with local lawmakers for the signing in a symbolic spot near a bus station in downtown Tampa -- property owned by the Department of Transportation that is designated for a rail stop.

“The real message here today is jobs, jobs, jobs,” Crist said. “During this economy particularly, we need to do everything we can to provide jobs for the people of Florida. Keep fighting for them every day to make sure they have opportunity for a brighter future.”

A handful of protesters picketed near the area, criticizing the bill as a waste of taxpayer money and comparing Crist to President Barack Obama.

But “it's the right thing to do,” Crist said. “This will provide thousands of jobs and millions in revenue for Florida.”

State Rep. Kevin Ambler, Lt. Gov. Jeff Kottkamp and New Port Richey Sen. Mike Fasano joined Crist in Tampa.

“This is a long time coming,” Fasano said before the signing. “It's not just been the last year, it's been the last 20 years.”

Earlier in Tallahassee, Crist hailed the bill as a crucial step into the state's future.

“Today we celebrate because Florida's transportation future moves into the 21st century,” Crist said in Tallahassee. The legislation, he added, “solidifies our state's commitment to expanding passenger rail transportation,” a development he said he hoped U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood will take into account as the Obama administration dispenses billions in rail stimulus money.

The legislation creates the SunRail commuter line on CSX tracks in Central Florida, provides more money for South Florida's ailing TriRail system and provides money for the first leg of a high speed rail system linking Tampa and Orlando.

Among those at the Tampa ceremony were Kottkamp, Fasano, state Sen. Victor Crist of Tampa, Mayor Pam Iorio and Tampa City Council member John Dingfelder. Crist publicly thanked former Hillsborough County Commissioner Ed Turanchik, who he said has been working on rail initiatives for 20 years.

In Tallahassee, Florida Transportation Secretary Stephanie Kopelousos was not in attendance and could not be asked questions about an e-mail controversy. Crist said he did not know why his DOT chief wasn't there.

Crist ordered his inspector general to investigate why some DOT e-mails sent to Kopelousos by a top aide used breakfast words like "French toast" and "pancakes" to get her attention. Crist called that "odd" and unnecessary, but he went ahead with an elaborate bill-signing trip. Besides Tampa, he planned to hold ceremonies in Orlando and Fort Lauderdale.