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From: *Miami Herald*, Thursday, February 17, 2011

Subject: **Scott's high-speed imprudence**

Provided by: Jenine Spoliansky, Kommunikatz, Inc.
jspoliansky@kommunikatz.com

<http://www.miamiherald.com/2011/02/17/2071609/scotts-high-speed-imprudence.html>

Scott's high-speed imprudence

OUR OPINION: Jobs-creating train deal merits bids not death

Why would Gov. Rick Scott just say no to \$2 billion in federal funding for a bullet train already approved by that the GOP-led Legislature — a project that would create thousands of jobs for Florida?

Many people are asking that question after the governor canceled plans for a high-speed train line between Tampa and Orlando, which eventually would extend to Miami's intermodal center near the airport. Many of those caught by surprise, in fact, are from the governor's own party.

U.S. Rep. John Mica, who chairs the U.S. House and Infrastructure Committee, said: "I have urged the governor to reconsider going forward and allow the private sector to assume the risk and any future costs for the project."

State Sen. Paula Dockery, an early supporter of Mr. Scott's "Let's get to work" campaign, noted, "It would be more prudent" for him to allow private companies to bid for the project and show how they would pay operating costs and any cost overruns before turning down the deal. As it is, she told the Herald/Times Tallahassee Bureau, there are seven teams from 11 countries ready to compete to build and run the bullet train.

Ms. Dockery is right. It was imprudent for the governor to unilaterally turn down an initial \$300 million in federal stimulus dollars already appropriated by the Legislature — in fact, he has no constitutional authority to do so. Florida Senate Budget Committee Chair J.D. Alexander and Senate Transportation Committee Chair Jack Latvala wondered as much, too.

This is a case of the governor putting his ideology before common sense — even if it means turning down 14,000 jobs and eventually as many as 25,000 by the time the Miami leg would be completed.

Mr. Scott says the project would put Florida taxpayers at risk because of potential cost overruns and that ridership figures are too rosy. Those are good reasons to question the project's viability — except U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood and Chairman Mica worked hard in

bipartisan fashion to ensure that Florida would not risk a penny because private companies bidding on the project would assume all cost overruns and operating expenses.

We believe the Miami-Orlando route would be the real moneymaker. South Florida is an international destination. Tourists from Europe and Latin America, who already ride transit systems in their country, would make good use of the bullet train to go from Miami to Disney World and back. In fact, the Miami-Orlando route should have been awarded first based on ridership potential and the distance that allows for faster transit than the Orlando-Tampa leg. Orlando-Tampa got the first leg because they bought the right-of-way and prepared the route long before there were any promises of federal money.

If done right, ridership should pay for operating the bullet train at all points without government subsidies. Mr. Scott jumped in front of the train project in a political reflex akin to hara-kiri. And for what? To please his tea party base, fewer than one in five of all Florida voters.

They have been most vocal about saying No to federal stimulus dollars, even for projects like the bullet train that can be quantified with high-paying construction jobs and will have a spin-off effect for other development. Even when the projects are coordinated nationally so that there will be a high-speed model for the future in a global economy where Florida can lead.

Sen. Bill Nelson and others in Congress will try to save the train for Florida — even without the governor's nod. How unfortunate that one man's political tunnel vision has sought to bury a project that just a few months ago won bipartisan support and would get Floridians to work.