

Commentary: Florida Sen. Bill Nelson feels high-speed rail could be the "interstate of the 21st century."

By U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson D-Orlando

Thursday, February 17, 2011

In 1956, President Dwight Eisenhower took on one of the biggest public-works projects in American history when he signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act.

Eisenhower's plan was ambitious, but visionary. Today it is impossible to imagine America without Eisenhower's interstate system. Tens of millions of us depend on highways to get to work and go about their daily lives.

I firmly believe high-speed rail could be the "interstate" of the 21st century. Further, Florida would see 24,000 new jobs and reap countless benefits from building the proposed bullet train between Orlando and Tampa, and then from Orlando to Miami.

Unfortunately, Florida Gov. Rick Scott does not seem to share that same vision.

I am disappointed in the governor's decision to reject \$2.4 billion in federal money for such a high-speed rail system—especially because he halted the train before it could even leave the station.

High-speed rail in Florida would be a major economic boost. It would help alleviate traffic on some of Florida's busiest highways. It would connect several of the state's biggest cities, and link many of the smaller communities in between.

In a statement released Wednesday explaining his decision, Scott cited cost as the overriding factor for turning down the money. He said Florida taxpayers would be forced to pay any cost overruns from the project.

High-speed rail is not cheap. That's a fact. All big projects worth investing in are not.

But what I told the governor when he called me Wednesday morning was that Floridians would not be on the hook for cost overruns or operating expenses associated with the train. Private companies who support the high-speed rail line have shown they are open to funding the state's share of the project.

There are other feasible solutions that would help alleviate Scott's worries. My staff and I are willing to work with the governor to come up with ways to help ease his concerns, because we strongly believe in this project.

The federal government has committed to giving the state 90 percent of the project, or about \$2.4 billion. All Florida was to put up as matching money was 10 percent, or about \$280 million.

Within hours of the governor announcing his decision to refuse the \$2.4 billion – and the 24,000 jobs the project would have brought – the Wall Street Journal reported that New York's two U.S. senators would seek the rail money rejected by Florida.

More specifically, the WSJ said, Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand already wrote U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood to ask him to redirect the money passed up by Scott to New York's Empire and Northeast Corridors. And Sen. Charles Schumer reportedly added that high-speed rail is a top priority for upstate New York and that the administration should redirect these funds to New York as quickly as possible.

Scott, in canceling plans for a high-speed train line between Orlando and Tampa and eventually Orlando and Miami, referred to it as "ObamaRail."

I urge the governor to set aside the partisan rhetoric and reconsider his decision – before it's too late.



© 2011 Scripps Newspaper Group — Online