Light rail bill passed

By Caitlin Craft

Pinellas News

Last month Hillsborough county residents stood clear of a penny tax that would increase residents’ taxes by $144 a year. This is a tax that commissioners hoped would go straight to the transit department and on the ballot for Nov 2010.

Well, Wednesday afternoon county commissioners got what they wanted. The bill is on its way to the governor to sign. The county proposed this bill on the basis that would improve public transportation and create hundreds of jobs during tough economic times.

However, now the real work begins. In the Tampa Bay area, that means implementing the Tampa Bay Area Regional Transportation Authority (TBARTA) Regional Transportation Master Plan, which will connect our entire area – from Citrus to Sarasota.

Florida’s High Speed Rail project has an abundance of potential to a city, which relies in a big way on tourism, to stay alive during this recession; however, tax payers want to know what it can do for them? While the rail will connect three major regions, Orlando, Tampa, and Miami, it will also give manufacturers a chance to move goods.

The bill is requesting $2.6 billion for the SunRail in Central Florida. U.S. Senator George LeMieux has good faith in the government to grant them the opportunity to pursue, what he class, a ground breaking project that will merge Tampa and Orlando.

Congressional negotiators put the finishing touches on a transportation spending bill that sends $40 million to Florida for SunRail, an installment that rail backers hope will add up to $307 million federal investment once the 61-mile commuter train is finished.

On the other hand, will Florida residents see the rail as an important money-making tool when they realize how much it is going to cost them? Last week, former Hillsborough County Commissioner Brian Blair, who is now running for Florida Senate House, voted against a tax increase that would help pay for such projects.

Blair said that there was over $1 billion set aside for just that and it had yet to be spent. As of now the state is trying to take just stimulus money from the government for their new high speed toy, and high-speed projects make for better competition than other requests for money.

Another potential road block is where the jobs will come from. The SunRail plan calls for purchasing 61.5 miles of track from CSX. Labor unions are against the deal because they say about 100 CSX workers and eventually several times that number would be replaced by state-contracted employees who likely would be nonunion.

Rep. Gary Aubuchon, a Cape Coral Republican and a sponsor of the special session, wonders why with Florida having over a million out of work that somebody would want a guarantee that they would keep their job in perpetuity.

GOP U.S. Senate Candidate Marco Rubio still isn’t sure about this proposal, while he feels the state is in need of the rail benefits, he believes that the proposal is being sold as a job market rather than a money maker. Governor Charlie Crist was quoted saying that the rail would provide 14,000 jobs.

The Federal Railroad Association predicted that in January or February grants would be given out to the states that would benefit most from the bullet trains. Among Florida, Washington and Texas have their names in the running. Other states are conducting environmental studies. Most of the states are asking for large amounts that the $8 billion on economic stimulus won’t be able to cover.

The Center for Urban Transportation at USF was once against this project, saying that it would not work because the cities are too spread out; however, Charlotte, NC debuted their train in 2007 they never would have predicted that it carries the amount of passengers it does today.

While a high speed rail would take more business from busses and cars, which in turn would emit less fossil fuel into the air, and create a better flow of tourism into otherwise overlooked areas, is the commuter population big enough to keep the trains running year round without taking more tax dollars from an already struggling economy?