



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on January 29, 2010

Florida High Speed Railway System

After nearly a quarter of a century of planning, Florida will see the building of a high speed rail system as early as late 2010. Speaking at the University of Tampa Thursday, President Obama announced that \$1.25 billion dollars of the project will be funded by the federal stimulus package.

Twenty-five years ago, after seeing a similar rail system in Japan, Florida's Governor Bob Graham advocated for the creation of the Florida High Speed Rail Commission. The intent was for the project to be completed by 1995.



When Jeb Bush took office in 1999, he halted the funding of the project, but Doc Dockery, husband to Senator Paula Dockery, used \$3 million dollars of his own money to persuade voters to pass a constitutional amendment to resume construction of the railway system. The railway system was to connect Tampa, Orlando, Jacksonville, Miami, and Tallahassee. Despite the amendment's lack of any specifics such as cost and time, and the fierce warnings from Jeb Bush, the Florida Chamber of Commerce, editorial sections of local newspapers, and mass transit advocates, 53% of voters passed the Amendment.

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The Florida High Speed Rail Authority was formed in 2001 to oversee the new railway system, but voters repealed the amendment in 2004 after being urged to do so by Governor Bush, who then derailed the project once again.

Plans were made to get the project back on track when last year's \$787 billion dollar stimulus bill championed by the Obama administration set aside money for the railway systems across the country. In Wednesday's State of the Union address, Obama announced that the Florida project is expected to create 23,000 jobs during the building of the railway system, and 600 jobs after the project is complete.

Generous estimates put ridership of the railway anywhere from 1.9 million to 3 million annually. Florida Governor Charlie Crist, along with other advocates, say the railway will increase jobs and tourism, aid in evacuation, and decrease traffic. Many Florida residents are excited at the prospect of an alternate mode of transportation to tourist areas like Orlando and Miami.

Additionally, Disney has pledged its support of the project, expecting it to generate further profits for the Disney theme parks. Offering 50 acres of land, Disney hopes for a railway to be built from Orlando International Airport directly to the parks.

No train type has been selected, though it is expected to be powered by electricity from overhead power lines. The train could reach up to speeds of about 160 mph.

The high-speed railway is estimated to generate approximately \$53 million annually, while expenses are believed to be \$52 million, turning a small profit. Skeptics, however, believe these figures, as well as the projected ridership and jobs created, to be highly overstated.



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While some are excited about the possibility of the railway system, citing the potential benefits, others are concerned by the concept of spending more money at a time when Florida is borrowing money to stay afloat. Opponents believe that there will not be enough ridership to sustain the system.

In the *Miami Herald*, City Commissioner Beth Dillaha of Winter Park, Florida, writes, "Up in their mahogany bleachers was a mostly clueless Senate majority, oblivious to the details and costs, deciding all of this without considering the massive state budget deficit of \$2.6 billion and the fact that Florida is borrowing \$300 million per month from the feds to cover unemployment benefits, which, by the way, must be repaid."

Among the opposition is Florida House Speaker Marco Rubio, whose disapproval of Charlie Crist's support of Obama has given him recent favorable numbers in the polls against Charlie Crist for Florida State Senate.

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