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## OBAMA SPEAKS IN TAMPA

# Fla. to Get \$1.25 Bil. For High-Speed Rail, Including a Stop in Polk County

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The Associated Press

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TAMPA | President Obama on Thursday announced \$1.25 billion of stimulus funding for a high-speed rail line stretching from Tampa to Orlando - and he also promised to return to ride the train once it's finished.

"I'm excited," he said to a cheering crowd at the University of Tampa. "I'm going to come back down here and ride it."

Florida was one of three states to win a total of \$8 billion in high-speed rail grants. The project has been under discussion for decades in Florida. The state in 2009 had originally applied for \$2.6 billion in stimulus funds to back the project.

Polk County was scheduled to get a stop on the rail line, at a location to be determined.

The initial phase of the plan - linking downtown Tampa to the Orlando airport - will be finished in 4 1/2 years if all goes well, said Ed Turanchik, president of the rail advocacy group ConnectUs.

"This will create one of the most dynamic regions in the world," he said. "This is probably



Phelan M. Ebenhack / AP

Florida Gov. Charlie Crist, background center, waits to greet Vice President Joe Biden, midground left, as Tampa Mayor Pam Iorio makes a photo of Biden greeting well-wishers after arriving at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Fla., Thursday, Jan. 28, 2009.

one of the most advanced public-works projects in America."

The second phase, connecting Orlando to Miami, is subject to funding and could be ready by 2017, said Turanchik.

Florida's Tampa-to-Orlando trains will reach a top speed of 150 mph, but will average 86 mph. Eventually the system could reach speeds about 180 mph when the line is extended to Miami, but only if decisions are made now to spend more money on designs and equipment compatible with faster technology.

Officials also hope Thursday's announcement will spark interest in a regional master plan that includes improvements to highways and buses, as well as short and long-distance rail that will connect Citrus, Hernando, Hillsborough, Manatee, Pasco, Pinellas, and Sarasota counties.

"Having a strong Tampa Bay regional transportation network will only bolster Florida's high-speed rail service. If travelers knew that once they arrive in Tampa, they have a connected, coordinated transportation system that can carry them to destinations within and beyond Hillsborough County, then they would place more value on the high speed connection," Bob Clifford, Executive Director for the Tampa Bay Area Regional Transportation Authority, said in a release.

Several politicians, from Obama to Gov. Crist to the state's Chief Financial Officer, Alex Sink, said the Tampa-to-Orlando rail project will bring thousands of jobs to Florida.

Gov. Charlie Crist told reporters he would thank Obama for approving stimulus funding to create a high-speed rail linking Tampa to Orlando. "I want to thank him on behalf of my fellow Floridians," Crist said. "To be able to generate tens of thousands of jobs right now is mission number one."

He called the funding "huge," and said the project would create more than 2,300 jobs.

But the jobs to design and make the rail cars and engines, signaling and track for the fastest trains will mainly go abroad to the European and Asian companies because it will take time for the U.S. to develop its own domestic high-speed rail industry, rail experts said. There will be U.S. manufacturing and engineering jobs for slower trains often described as "higher speed" or "midspeed." Much of the domestic high-speed work, however, will be the kind of construction and earth-moving work typical of highway projects, they said.

Regardless of who works to build the train, proponents said the finished system would be great for international tourists and seniors especially. It was also cheered by Central Florida's tourism industry.

"We're excited to support mass transportation that works for our community, and we're encouraged by the opportunities high-speed rail could bring to central Florida," Disney spokesman Bryan Malenius said. "We look forward to working with officials to place high-speed rail station for a new system on or near our property, taking into consideration the needs of both tourists and local residents."

Tom Schroder, a spokesman for Universal Studios in Orlando, was more muted in his reaction: "We have long supported any transportation solution that better moves people through our community - provided that it fairly represents the needs of all potential users. We look forward to any next step toward that solution."

But not all are happy about the project.

Michael Capria, 57, of Tampa, stood outside Obama's town hall meeting Thursday, protesting the cost of the rail project - and other Obama priorities.

"They are using bogus growth numbers to promote ridership on this train," he said. "Right now, more people are leaving the state of Florida."

Capria said that "people in Florida don't want to ride trains" and that even if folks catch a train from downtown Tampa to downtown Orlando, they will need a car to get around.

"And I like trains," he said.

[ Associated Press writers Travis Reed in Miami and Joan Lowy in Washington contributed to this report. ]

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