

OrlandoSentinel.com

State asks feds for \$270 million for commuter rail

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4:35 PM EDT, August 24, 2009

The state is seeking \$270 million in federal aid to help pay for the planned SunRail commuter train that would run through Central Florida.

An application filed Monday with the Federal Railroad Administration said the money would be used to help offset the \$1.2 billion cost of SunRail, which would link DeLand in Volusia County with downtown Orlando and Poinciana in Osceola County.

The federal money would come from an at least \$8 billion fund set aside to build high-speed trains in the country, plus some related projects.

Florida also wants \$2.5 billion for a train that could hit 150 mph on a 90-mile route between Orlando International Airport and downtown Tampa, with a midway stop in Lakeland. A final application for that project is due Oct. 2.

The 51-page application sent in Monday would lighten the financial load on the state, as well as the five local governments banding together to operate the commuter rail system and to buy 61 miles of track from the CSX railroad company based in Jacksonville.

Florida officials contend the federal money should come from the high-speed fund because SunRail would feed passengers into the fast train. U.S. Rep. John Mica, R-Winter Park, says Washington has already pledged \$300 million for the project, which has twice been voted down in the Florida Legislature.

Ten areas are going after high-speed train money, including Boston to Washington; Portland to Seattle; and San Diego to San Francisco.

Opponents have criticized the price tag of SunRail, saying Florida is doing little more than engaging in corporate welfare for CSX.

That criticism could be blunted somewhat if the federal government ends up paying \$570 million of the cost.

State senators twice have balked at approving a \$200 million insurance pact that assigns liability in case there is an accident with SunRail. Critics contend the plan placed too much risk on the state and not enough on CSX.

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SunRail enthusiasts hope to blunt that charge by having CSX assume more risk, particularly when its employees are at fault.

The Obama administration may start awarding high speed grants by the end of the year.

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