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## Fed transit chief tells Florida Senate to 'get act together' on commuter rail

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U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood had a simple message Monday for the Florida Senate: Get behind the planned SunRail commuter train in Central Florida, or forget about the state winning \$2.5 billion in federal money for a high-speed train linking Orlando with Tampa.

"You've got to get your act together," LaHood told the *Orlando Sentinel* about the Senate, which twice has failed to approve SunRail.

"If they don't," he said moments later to a Florida official, "there's going to be a lot of disappointed people."

LaHood gave two speeches, plus a short interview, during a visit to Central Florida. The first was to a transportation convention at the J.W. Marriott hotel in south Orange County and the second to more than 100 elected and area leaders in downtown Orlando. He left little doubt that the \$8 billion allocated by the Obama administration and Congress for high-speed rail would go to the communities that support all forms of transit, from buses to commuter trains to bicycle paths — not just roads. And he wants the systems to connect, allowing alternatives to people who want to get out of their cars, reducing congestion and pollution.

"It [high-speed rail] is the next step," LaHood said, "the next level of transportation. ... It means you are forward thinking."

"Miss out on trains capable of going at least 110 mph, he said, and "you are going to be stuck on the highway."

Forty states, including Florida, have filed 287 preliminary applications for high-speed rail projects. The winners won't be announced until the end of the year, and there will be plenty of losers. If all the projects were built, it would cost \$103 billion.

"Everybody is not going to get their own stop, in simple terms," LaHood said.

Despite his strong words about SunRail, LaHood stopped short of saying Florida would get high-speed rail money if the Senate passes a liability agreement necessary for the 61.5-mile commuter-rail system that would stretch from Volusia to Osceola counties.

But that did not stop U.S. Reps. Corrine Brown, D-Jacksonville, and John Mica, R- Winter Park, from promising success. They shared the speaking dais with LaHood.

"We're going to have it, and it can't be a bridge to nowhere," Brown said, meaning that SunRail could provide passengers to the would-be high-speed train.

Also complicating the picture is the situation with the Tri-Rail commuter train in South Florida. It needs more state or local money or layoffs and service reductions are likely. That could force the federal government to seek repayment of some of the \$500 million it has invested in the system running along Interstate 95 in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties.

"We are hearing noises that distress us greatly," said Peter Rogoff, who runs the Federal Transit Administration and traveled with LaHood.

SunRail supporters have long seen Tri-Rail as a key to winning Senate approval. The Central Florida delegation twice has offered to vote for a \$2 daily surcharge on rental cars in South Florida to cover Tri-Rail operating expenses. But South Florida senators generally have balked at the deal. Legislators in both the Senate and House, where there are enough votes to pass SunRail, were in Tallahassee for committee meetings Monday.

Two of SunRail's leading proponents, Republican Sens. Lee Constantine of Altamonte Springs and Andy Gardiner of Orlando, have been pushing for a special session for a third run at the \$1.2 billion project but have not been able to muster enough support to schedule one. They said LaHood's words should be helpful, but work remains to be done. The last SunRail vote went down 23-16.

"It's all there for the taking, if we just do it," Constantine said.

Added Gardiner: "We have to come up with something to show the federal government we're in the game."

Opponents have argued that SunRail is too expensive, could lead to the loss of union jobs and places too much financial risk on the state if there is an accident. Winter Park Commissioner Beth Dillaha, who attended LaHood's Orlando meeting, said she cannot back SunRail because she fears it will attract so few passengers that local governments will bust their budgets making up the train's deficits.

" Washington might have a printing press up there," she said, "but we don't."