

## Obama announces high-speed rail in Tampa; says he'll be back to ride it

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TAMPA — President Barack Obama took the stage this afternoon in Tampa for a town hall meeting saying, "We are going to start building a new high-speed rail line right here in Tampa, building for the future, putting people to work."

Obama is announcing Florida will receive \$1.25 billion in funding for a high-speed rail line from Tampa to Orlando.

"I'm excited," he said. "I'm going to come back down here and ride it. ... Y'all have a date!"

After a rock-star welcome from the crowd of approximately 3,000, Obama harkened back to his messages from the campaign trail and Wednesday's State of the Union address.

He said he and Vice President Joe Biden sought office because they wanted to solve problems, not take the easy road.

"We ran to get the tough stuff done," he said. "I make no apology for trying to fix stuff that's hard.

"Change," he said, "never comes without a fight."

"You're doing a good job," someone yelled from the crowd.

He said job creation has to be the No. 1 priority in 2010.

"The markets have stabilized," he said. "The economy is growing again. The worst of the storm is past. But I think all of you understand the devastation remains."

At times during his speech, which began just before 1:30 p.m., the cheers and applause were so loud it was hard to hear what the president was saying.

Obama and Biden arrived at the University of Tampa just as it was announced the Bob Martinez Sports Center had reached capacity.

Organizers gave out too many tickets and just before 1 p.m., officials took about 100 ticket holders across the street to an outdoor stadium on campus where sound from the event is being piped in.

Obama and Biden arrived separately at MacDill Air Force Base about noon. U.S. Reps. Kathy Castor, D-Tampa, Kendrick Meek, D-Miami, Alan Grayson, D-Orlando, and Debbie Wasserman Schultz, D-Weston, flew in on Air Force One with the president. Biden traveled separately, as is protocol when he and the president go to the same place.

Gov. Charlie Crist, state Chief Financial Officer Alex Sink, Tampa Mayor Pam Iorio and Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer were there to greet the president.

Crist shook the president's hand, gave him a letter and the two spoke for less than a minute. (A pool reporter timed their handshake at 27 seconds.)

At a Board of Governors meeting at USF later in the day, Crist was asked why he didn't attend the town hall.

"Well, I was with him today, the only Republican to be with him, and I was proud to be there because it was the right thing to do," Crist said. "It's important for us to work together for the betterment of our people, and I'll do it every single day."

Asked earlier about rumors that he did not want to appear with the president, Crist said, "If that were true, I wouldn't be here."

Crist went on to say, "We don't agree on everything, but we agree when it comes to fighting for jobs for my fellow Floridians. I have an opportunity as governor to fight for them every day, and damn it, I'm gonna do it."

By 10:30 a.m. the room was filling up at the Bob Martinez Sports Center. A jazz band greeted the crowd, along with a large red banner that announced, "The University of Tampa Welcomes President Obama."

Several local and state leaders were there. Among them was state Sen. Charlie Justice, D-St. Petersburg, who said the high-speed rail money is huge for Tampa Bay in terms of bolstering the economy and bringing jobs to Florida.

"To make it a true success, the regional mass transit is going to have to come through," he said.

Justice, however, voted against the regional rail initiatives the state Legislature considered in a special session last month. Some said the initiative was seen as necessary to attract the federal stimulus money for high-speed rail.

Justice said, among other things, he had concerns about the state's liability in the regional rail system.

"You want to do it the right way, and there were portions of that bill that weren't the right way," he said. "It doesn't mean I don't believe in mass transit."

Tampa defense attorney Barry Cohen, who brought a photo of his young son with the president for Obama to sign, gushed about the State of the Union address from his cushy viewing spot close to the stage.

"I think he's a visionary," he said. "People forget what he inherited. He wants to unite the country and unite the world."

Joe Robinson, a Tampa mechanical engineer, arrived wearing a Kevin White for Hillsborough County Commission T-shirt and a whistle around his neck. He said he planned to blow it loud and long when Obama announces the funding for high-speed rail. "The train is leaving the station, and we just want to make sure African-American companies are going to get a piece of this," he said.

Republican Hillsborough County Commissioner Rose Ferlita said she was putting party politics aside and was excited to hear the president speak. The high-speed rail money, she said, would likely build momentum for Hillsborough County's rail efforts. But like fellow commissioner Kevin Beckner, she wants to make sure local voters understand that the local rail referendum will also consider more than just trains. "There's going to be some confusion," she said.

The County Commission in the coming months will consider a referendum on a 1-cent sales tax to pay for light rail, expanded bus service and road improvements in Hillsborough County. Beckner said it's important for people to understand that although the federal money is exclusively for rail, the local efforts are for all forms of transportation.

"Yes, the rail is involved, but it's not just trains," he said.

State Sen. Arthenia Joyner, D-Tampa, was also in the audience at the University of Tampa. She, too, voted against the state rail initiative.

"The state of Florida can't afford it at this time," she said, noting that funding health care is more vital.

Joyner said she has supported Florida's high-speed rail efforts in the past before Gov. Jeb Bush pulled the plug on them in 2004. She declined to say whether she thought the federal investment in high-speed rail is a wise expenditure.

"That hasn't come before me yet," she said.

Susan Glickman, a climate and energy advocate, said she found Obama's State of the Union remarks about clean energy "very inspiring." High-speed rail, she said, is another part of the broader clean energy package.

"It's the wave of the future, and clearly the president recognizes it," she said.

Former Bucs coach Tony Dungy was also in the crowd, and the president reserved a special shout-out for him at the start, saying he's "a model individual and leader."

The speech resonated with people of all ages.

"I'm just exuberant," said Tampa resident Altamese Saunders, 81.

"This is just an opportunity of a lifetime," said her daughter, 55-year-old Karen Saunders.

University of Tampa sophomores Rebecca Coogan and Maggie Redmond, both 19, trembled and screamed after running down from their bleacher seats to get a close-up look of the president and vice president shaking hands in the crowd.

Coogan made sure to get a cell phone picture that captured both the leaders and her Obama shoulder bag.

"He's not a robot," Coogan said. "He's a human being."

"He's such a modern thinker," Redmond said. "He makes me want to be involved."

"I'm going to freak out!" Coogan said.

*Times staff writers Marlene Sokol and Rick Danielson contributed to this report.*

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