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Florida Governor Signs Bill to Expand Rail Service

By [DAMIEN CAVE](#)

MIAMI — Gov. [Charlie Crist](#) signed a package of legislation into law on Wednesday that seeks to shore up commuter rail service in South Florida, add service in the state's center and win billions of dollars in federal money for a bullet train linking Tampa and Orlando.

At a news conference in Tallahassee, Mr. Crist said [the measure](#) would create a framework for future rail projects, modernize travel and energize Florida's economy. "These rail projects mean more economic opportunity and more jobs for the people of Florida," he said.

The rail plan, however, has been controversial among the governor's fellow Republicans. Several lawmakers and [Marco Rubio](#) — a former speaker of the Florida House who is challenging Mr. Crist for the Republican Senate nomination — have questioned the plan's cost, as well as the governor's willingness to steer Florida toward [President Obama](#)'s stimulus program.

Mr. Crist did not mention the stimulus Wednesday. He has recently softened his support after criticism from conservative Republicans, including Mr. Rubio.

But [an analysis](#) of the bill by the Florida House says the State Department of Transportation is requesting \$3.2 billion for four projects under a program that is part of the [stimulus package](#).

That includes \$2.6 billion to build [high-speed rail](#) between Tampa and Orlando and \$30 million to study extending the service to Miami. It also includes a request for \$268 million to "restore and enhance" rail service along 350 miles of Florida's east coast between Jacksonville and Miami, and \$270 million to subsidize the state's proposed purchase of track in central Florida for a commuter service known as [SunRail](#).

The federal Transportation Department is expected to announce its awards this winter, and state lawmakers have said that was a catalyst for the special session this month that produced the rail legislation.

Supporters have said the package — which adds \$15 million for [Tri-Rail](#) in South Florida, and sets aside \$60 million for rail statewide, starting in 2014 — would promote "smart growth" and transform the state's economy.

But Alex Burgos, a spokesman for Mr. Rubio, criticized Mr. Crist for again “putting his faith in government to create jobs instead of the private sector.”

State Senator Paula Dockery, a Republican from central Florida who is running for governor, also condemned the bill. She said the state was using “fuzzy math” to promise thousands of jobs immediately, instead of spread over three decades. And, she said, the state is overpaying the railroad operator [CSX](#) for SunRail tracks, while opening itself up to liability for accidents caused by the company’s freight trains.

Ms. Dockery is also at the center of a dispute over how the legislation was drafted. Her office filed a public records request last month for all e-mail related to the bill, and among the thousands of messages produced by the State Department of Transportation, three used breakfast foods in the subject line — “pancake,” “Pancakes” and “French Toast.”

Each had no text, just attachments about the bill, leading Ms. Dockery to accuse state officials of “using code words in an effort to disguise the true content.”

Transportation Secretary Stephanie Kopelousos has said the subject lines were simply to get her attention, but Mr. Crist directed the state’s chief inspector general Tuesday to investigate.

Ms. Dockery is still waiting on a follow-up request for all e-mail messages “containing breakfast food related words, including but not limited to: pancake, French toast, bacon, egg, cereal, waffle, grits, and sausage.”

Gary Fineout contributed reporting from Tallahassee, Fla.

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