



LIKE POLITICOS, TRANS ADVOCATES LOOK TO 2012, 2016

By KEITH LAING
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THE CAPITAL, TALLAHASSEE, Nov. 22, 2010.....The way election calendars work, politicians in Florida are already thinking 2012 and 2016. For an entirely set of different reasons, so are Florida transportation advocates.

The Florida Department of Transportation begins a series of public hearings this week to discuss what should be included in its next Five Year Work Program, which will take the department through the projects it hopes to fund from fiscal year 2012 to FY 2016. There is no guarantee that everything in the plan will ultimately be funded, but it is virtually certain that anything that isn't won't be.

That makes hearings like the one scheduled for Tuesday in Daytona Beach vital, said Floridians for Better Transportation President Doug Callaway. Future meetings will be held in Brevard, Flagler, Lake, Marion, Orange, Osceola, Seminole, Sumter and Volusia Counties.

“Not just from a transportation perspective, but from a business perspective for the state of Florida, with 12 percent unemployment and thousands of Floridians out of work, now's the time to acknowledge the job creation potential (of transportation spending),” Callaway said. “DOT's kind of like a battleship, you can't stop and turn it on a dime. It needs proper planning.”

To wit, the DOT's current work plan, which ran from 2008-2013, included money for the controversial SunRail commuter train in Orlando, with the caveat that it could not be spent unless the Legislature approved the purchase of tracks from CSX Corp. That proved to be more difficult than backers envisioned, with the deal only narrowly passing a reluctant Senate in a special session late in 2009.

Similarly, the transportation fights of 2012-2016 could be contained in the forthcoming DOT five-year plan. Projects included this time around include a hub for Central Florida Commuter Rail System Operations and Maintenance, money for South Florida's Tri-Rail and most public bus systems in Florida. There are \$7.8 million in federal and local matching funds for rail in the plan.

Despite the controversy over past transportation projects however, Callaway said that the area could be the one of the few to see growth in government spending under Gov.-elect Rick Scott.

Scott's pledge to create 700,000 jobs could outweigh his promises about slicing government spending, he said, because transportation spending typically goes largely straight to the private sector.

"The DOT doesn't build roads; contractors do," said Callaway. "Eighty to 90 percent of the design work that's done by DOT is done by contractors."

DOT spokesman Dick Kane said it was too early to tell what will be included in the five-year work plan because the department was still soliciting input from local leaders.

"We're in what's sort of the gaming cycle, starting to put together district projects," he said Monday. "We've gone to (Metropolitan Planning Organizations) and public officials to see what their priorities are, to see what our priorities are and to see what funding is available."

Kane said it will not be until February or March that DOT starts putting together preliminary project lists. The work-plan is not set to be finalized until July.

The lobby charged with representing the contractors who will bid on the projects laid out by the DOT, the Florida Transportation Builders Association, said it was closely watching the five-year planning process too. But FTBA President Bob Burleson said contractors won't be as invested in the intimate details as other stakeholders.

"Contractors are very anxious to know what projects are coming and where they are, so they can make plans," Burleson said. "They may want to strategically locate their offices or get certain parts. The thing that's important to contractors about the five-year work plan was that it provided certainty to us. We knew what work was coming. At least in the past, it almost guaranteed that work was going to be done."

Burleson said with lawmakers having withheld \$10 billion in spending from current transportation work plans since 2006 as the state budget has dwindled, the forthcoming five year plan will not be as certain as it used to be. But he expressed optimism that Scott, who made his business acumen central to his successful gubernatorial campaign, would not be as quick to tap into the transportation trust fund as lawmakers have been in recent years.

Last year, lawmakers took \$160 million out of the Department of Transportation trust fund to balance the \$70.2 billion state budget, using the money for public schools. But Gov. Charlie Crist vetoed the trust fund sweep after being prodded by Burleson's FBTA and other transportation advocacy groups. The sweep was not one of the several veto overrides during last week's special session.

Scott and the more conservative 2011-2012 Legislature figure to have a warmer relationship, but Burleson said Scott may take a similar line if lawmakers again try to dip into the transportation fund.

"If you're talking about jobs, you would think you would look at other places," he said. "We're ready to fight, but we hope we don't have to."

Callaway said every dollar invested in transportation brought the state a return of \$5.60, and created 28,000 jobs, figures often cited by advocates as lawmakers have targeted the transportation trust fund for plugging holes in the leaky state budget. Callaway said he shared Burleson's hope the Scott administration would be friendly to transportation.

"If we're penny-wise and pound foolish and disinvest in transportation, we're going to regret this day for years to come," he said.

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Detailed context on Florida transportation issues is available on the NSF Transportation Backgrounder at <http://www.newsserviceflorida.com/transportation/transportation.htm>.

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