

Some Regions Better Prepared For High-Speed Rail

September 1, 2009

The Obama administration will soon announce the recipients of grants from an \$8 billion high-speed-rail fund. Almost 300 proposals have been received, collectively requesting more than \$100 billion.

The administration will have to be highly selective, and it is likely to favor those projects that are the furthest along in their planning and have state or private sources of funding committed.

NPR looks at where the key regions of Florida, the Northwest and the South stand in the process.

FLORIDA

Florida's public officials and rail advocates say they're well-positioned in the high-speed-rail derby. The state has requested \$2.5 billion to build what would be the first leg of a statewide system: a 100-mile line of rail from Orlando to Tampa. All of the land and necessary permits required for such a project have already been acquired, according to Florida Department of Transportation Secretary Stephanie Kopelousos, who says Florida's is "as close to shovel-ready as there is a project around this country."

High-speed rail is something Florida has been talking about for a long time — nearly 30 years. It's a process that has outlasted several governors and the submission of several rail proposals, all of which went nowhere.

But the prospect of receiving federal stimulus funds for high-speed rail has generated another big push. And despite showing little interest at first, some leading Republicans in the state Legislature — along with Republican Gov. Charlie Crist — are now speaking out in favor of the Florida proposal. — *Greg Allen*

THE NORTHWEST

Gregor Robertson, the mayor of Vancouver, British Columbia, and Sam Adams, the mayor of Portland, Ore., recently signed an agreement pledging to work together to get a high-speed-rail line between their two cities.

"We have a great affinity for our cities to the south, Seattle and Portland, and certainly would prefer to have more connection through rail and high-speed rail," Robertson says. "To be able to jump on a train and be able to be in Seattle or Portland in a couple of hours would be a remarkable breakthrough."

Though such a line could facilitate greater intercity travel, and even American-Canadian cultural exchange, it will also be expensive. "To do some of the things some of the folks here are talking about, I just don't know if that's going to be realistic — at least in the next couple of decades — here in the Pacific Northwest, because of the terrain and the geography and the cost," says Kirk Fredrickson, a project manager with the Washington state Department of Transportation.

Washington state officials have just sent off the first wave of grant proposals to the federal government. They are hoping for about \$900 million in federal funding in this round and are preparing a second wave of applications that will go out soon. They hope the millions in state funds that they've spent over the years to develop passenger rail service in the Northwest will give them a leg up when it comes to seeking federal money. — *Liam Moriarty*

THE SOUTH

In many parts of the South, it has taken civic leaders — and citizens — a long time to warm up to the idea of high-speed rail. Not all are convinced that it's something they want or need. That indecision has set the region back in the race for federal stimulus funds. Now the Southern states, with the exception of Virginia and North Carolina, are scrambling to catch up.

While other regions have polished renderings of stations and have acquired all the land and permits necessary, in the South, state laws still hamper high-speed-rail development. For example, Alabama's Constitution, written in 1901, forbids the state's Department of Transportation to invest money in alternative transportation, including trains.

Others believe the South is too carcentric to break its ways and don't believe that a train system would be used enough to make it worthwhile to build