

## CSX railroad plan upsets Polk leaders

By [David DeCamp](#), Times Staff Writer

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TALLAHASSEE — Big town politicians pushing their traffic on rural neighbors. A railroad with a lucrative government deal. An outraged small city.

It's the backstory of how Orlando may one day get commuter rail. And it's the reason for the heated debate dividing Central Florida and Tampa Bay lawmakers in Tallahassee.

The fight is over a complex plan struck under former Gov. Jeb Bush to run commuter trains on CSX's railroad through Orlando. In exchange, the state would subsidize the building of the biggest railyard in the Southeast in Winter Haven. It would help improve CSX's freight line through west-central Florida.

But largely unnoticed before the deal was struck was what would happen to Polk County. Clearing rail space in Orlando meant more trains slicing through Lakeland and trucks chugging around Winter Haven.

"They are going to divide our city," says Lakeland Mayor Buddy Fletcher, whose citizens are in an uproar. "They are going to destroy our downtown."

Lakeland's Republican Sen. Paula Dockery, among others, wants more study and a new train route around her hometown. Some Tampa Bay lawmakers worry the extra freight traffic could curtail Tampa's own bid to one day have commuter rail.

But Orlando area lawmakers want to deliver long-promised traffic relief to residents and businesses. Their allies include millionaire Sen. J.D. Alexander, R-Lake Wales, who has pushed to enlarge transportation options in a region where his family and business allies own land.

The question before the Legislature: Is the train already down the tracks or will critics derail it?

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Orlando leaders have wanted commuter trains for years to relieve Interstate 4 gridlock, but efforts failed until late 2004, when CSX offered to help as part of its strategic plan.

The Jacksonville-based railroad, which doesn't run commuter lines, wanted better freight lines in Florida.

Commuter trains could run through downtown Orlando. Then CSX would increase freight traffic on its other main route from Baldwin into Polk County. State officials liked improving freight routes, too.

The agreement unveiled in August 2006 set aside \$150-million to buy 61.5 miles of rail for the commuter project. The state also would spend \$341-million to improve CSX's other freight routes and help create a massive rail center in Winter Haven.

The railyard proved an easy sell in Winter Haven, where CSX said the project would add more than 8,000 jobs in a decade.

"It's going to be an enormous engine for us," said Jack Barnhart, executive director of the East Polk Committee of 100, an economic development agency.

But Dockery and other lawmakers, such as Tampa's Sen. Victor Crist, say the massive railyard, its traffic and the money for CSX didn't get anywhere near the public review that the Orlando portion did. For more than a year, residents expressed similar dismay in public meetings.

Senate Majority Leader Dan Webster, R-Winter Garden, said the Polk area had been discussed publicly, though. "It had to go somewhere ... and there was only one other [CSX] line," he said. "Whether people understood that or not, I did. And that was five or

six years ago."

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Fueling the tension in Tallahassee is how the project was funded in the first place and that one senator, in particular, is recorded as having a role.

As the 2005 legislative session drew to a close, a Florida Senate committee quietly revised a growth management bill (SB 360) that ultimately provided \$1.5-billion for transportation projects. There was no mention of CSX and commuter rail.

But within a month and nearly a year before Gov. Bush would announce the deal, state transportation officials were touting the plan as an "illustrative project" in presentations.

A Senate record shows that Alexander proposed adding the money. But Alexander isn't heard doing so on a recording of the meeting. He said he had no role with the money, although he supports the project and says Lakeland issues can be ironed out in the planning process.

The senator is a member of one of Florida's famed agricultural families. From the fortunes of the late Ben Hill Griffin Jr., the clan has built a large land management company, Alico. It has major holdings in Polk and southwest Florida. He's also president of Atlanticblue Group, which has a stake in Alico.

Since CSX picked Winter Haven, the family businesses have added holdings nearby. Another lawmaker, Rep. Marty Bowen, R-Haines City, has owned 84 acres near the site since before the project was announced, records show.

The railyard also could benefit another project Alexander desires, a 152-mile proposed toll road from Polk to Collier counties. Currently shelved due to a lack of traffic demand, the \$7-billion Heartland Parkway would open to development land owned by Alico and others, including Bowen Brothers, the House member's family company. At its optimal, CSX said 1,573 trucks will travel to or from the railyard daily.

"There really is no connection between the two, except that the CSX project would put truck traffic on the road that would boost up the feasibility of Heartland Parkway in the Polk segment," said former Sen. Rick Dantzler, a Bartow attorney who advocated the toll road.

Alexander said he played no role in CSX's selection of Winter Haven for the new railyard, echoing CSX project manager Rick Hood. CSX considered 15 sites, including Pasco and Hernando counties, before approaching Winter Haven in August 2005, Hood said.

Records and company reports show Alexander's recent business investments came after the CSX deal became public.

In January, Atlanticblue announced it bought Phoenix Industries, a distributor and warehouse a few miles up the CSX rail line from the proposed terminal. CSX officials say their rail terminal would handle large freight containers, unlike the Phoenix Industries refrigerated commodities business.

Last month, Atlanticblue also became a partner in a 40-acre, 150-home site in Winter Haven. Spokesman Bud Brewer confirmed the company also bought two hotels in Winter Haven.

Alexander said his company purchased Phoenix Industries and other properties to diversify. "You can't make any money farming," he said. "If we could, we would."

But opponents say it's just one more reason to slow the project.

"Obviously there a lot of issue like that which are a part of this project. And even when the details and the questions of many people come up, it seems to be the answer is always, it's a done deal," said Dockery, who backed a defunct high-speed rail plan Bush and CSX opposed.

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State transportation officials back the new project but concede breakdowns with Polk.

"Should we have done more outreach? Absolutely." Transportation Secretary Stephanie Kopelousos said. "But when we did this

negotiation, requiring CSX to make improvements on their other line ... is a benefit to the traveling public."

But recent appraisals, released Friday after a request by the *St. Petersburg Times*, will provide more fodder for critics. They suggest the state is spending at least \$70-million more than what it might have paid for just the commuter rail property.

Dockery and Lakeland's two House members, Dennis Ross and Seth McKeel, want to withhold payment to CSX until Lakeland's issues are addressed. They and others are also challenging a bill that would grant CSX some liability immunity.

"Why should the taxpayers have to accept the responsibility for a private corporation?" said Sen. Mike Fasano, R-New Port Richey.

But central Florida leaders rallied in the Capitol last week, including Webster and future House Speaker Dean Cannon, R-Winter Park. And Gov. Charlie Crist separately call the proposal a "great idea" that "sounds forward thinking."

"We've got a town saying 'They can't do that,' and they have 95,000 people," Webster said. "I think the balance weighs in favor of the metropolitan area of Central Florida. It's worse to have the traffic there than in maybe a more rural part of the state."

*Times staff writer Steve Bousquet contributed to this report. David DeCamp can be reached at [ddecamp@sptimes.com](mailto:ddecamp@sptimes.com) or (850) 224-7263.*

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