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TRANSPORTATION

SunRail seeks federal funding for 12-mile expansion to DeLand



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JIM CARCHIDI

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News writer, Orlando Business Journal
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SunRail

Sanford, FL

SunRail CEO [Nicola Liquori](#) said the commuter rail system will know by the end of August whether or not it will get \$38 million in federal funds for its planned 12-mile, \$77 million expansion from DeBary to DeLand.

At the July 18 Central Florida Commuter Rail Commission meeting, Liquori said SunRail has applied for federal redistribution funds to finance the Phase 2 North expansion. While Volusia County and the state together have committed about \$39 million for the project, the rail system has struggled for years to secure the balance.

According to Liquori, the process to be considered for federal redistribution, or unobligated, funds included first submitting a request to the Federal Highway Administration to receive the funds for various projects, including Phase 2 North.

If selected, SunRail and the commission then would have to “flex” the redistributed funds to the Federal Transit Administration by the beginning of August, since the money actually is intended for highways. Finally, the total amount of funding provided for the project would be revealed toward the end of August, informing SunRail whether it received enough to cover the nearly \$38 million it still needs.



Nicola Liquori of SunRail

JIM CARCHIDI

“We don’t have all of the information,” Liquori said at the meeting. “We have to take actions to be prepared, but we don’t have perfect information as it relates to what the total funding is that will be available. What we wanted to ensure is that everything we needed to do on our end [for] state and local commitments was all lined up to put us in the best possible position to move forward with the project should the available funds be there.”

The potential for a federal funding opportunity to finance the expansion first was announced at the Central Florida Commuter Rail Commission meeting on May 30, 2019, by Florida Department of Transportation Secretary Kevin Thibault.

The commission also discussed Liquori’s July 12 letter to Volusia County Council Chair Ed Kelley in which she

requested that the county confirm its commitment to contributing its \$19.2 million share of the project costs so SunRail could move forward with the process of requesting federal redistribution funds.

Volusia County Council on July 16 confirmed its promise of providing the \$19.2 million for a 12-mile expansion of SunRail to the planned DeLand station, but reiterated its unhappiness with the original agreement to help fund the commuter train line's operations and maintenance. Volusia County previously has complained about the 2007 agreement to handoff the operational cost of the train line on May 1, 2021, to the city of Orlando and Orange, Osceola, Seminole and Volusia counties.

Kelley stated in a July 16 letter to Thibault that the system operational deficits for the rail expansion are “spectacularly beyond expectation.” Despite this, Kelley wrote that “Volusia will honor its 2007 contractual design and construction funding commitment, if the department furnishes the remainder.”

“None of us want to be obstructionist,” Kelley said at the meeting. “We want whatever is the best for the commission and for all the members, and that’s what we’re trying to come up with.”

Orlando Mayor and Central Florida Commuter Rail Commission Chairman Buddy Dyer expressed support to advance Phase 2 North after years of trying to expand the project over the entire 64-mile rail corridor. “I think now is the time, and as of today we’re committed to moving forward on Phase 2 North,” he said at the meeting.

Next up, the Central Florida Commuter Rail Commission will meet Aug. 29 to discuss the federal decision.

