

EDITORIAL: Florida's choo-choo boo-boo

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In 2000, state voters approved a constitutional amendment requiring Florida to build a high-speed rail, or “bullet train,” linking cities in the central and southern parts of the state. In 2004 they came to their senses and repealed the amendment. That killed the bullet train, right?

Not so fast. In government, bad ideas never die. They just wait for new sources of funding.

Gov. Charlie Crist applied last week for federal stimulus money to build the bullet train. He expects an answer by the end of the year.

This is a bad idea for a heap of reasons. Here are three:

¶ – The bullet train will cost billions to build — \$10.5 billion, by the governor’s optimistic estimate — yet won’t come close to paying for itself. Passenger revenue likely will cover only 5.6 percent to 12.7 percent of the train’s annual costs, according to a 2004 study by the James Madison Institute.

¶ – Nationwide, high-speed rail systems cost more than building new highways in the same transportation corridors, according to a 2008 analysis by the Cato Institute. And highways serve more travelers.

¶ – We in Northwest Florida will never benefit from a bullet train downstate, regardless of how many of our tax dollars go toward funding it. Worse, operating the train could siphon cash from road projects in our region.

The Daily News has opposed the bullet train boondoggle for years. In June 2002, the train’s biggest booster, Lakeland multimillionaire C.C. “Doc” Dockery, got so ticked off at us he wrote a guest column saying we should be ashamed. Why, the high-speed rail someday may extend as far west as Pensacola, he said.

Mr. Dockery’s carrot-on-a-stick was mostly hokum. The amendment that ordered construction of the bullet train specified it would link “the five largest urban areas of the state.” Northwest Florida wasn’t part of the plan.

It still isn’t. Gov. Crist envisions a high-speed rail linking Tampa, Orlando and Miami. That’s it.

Reason enough to hope today’s effort to revive the bullet train, like the 2000 bid, jumps the track.