

Florida voters know where the bullet train should go

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In the wake of the passage of Amendment 1, approving a Florida bullet train, Florida's elected officials face a simple truth, the essence of which was articulated by President Ronald Reagan in his 1989 farewell address:

"'We the People' tell the government what to do, it doesn't tell us. 'We the People' are the driver -- the government is the car. And we decide where it should go, and by what route, and how fast."

Of course, in this instance "the government" isn't so much a car as it is a train. Still, the 2.8 million Floridians who approved the high-speed rail system have indeed decided where they want their government to "go, and by what route, and how fast."

It should go to "the five largest urban areas of the State" via a "monorail, fixed guideway, or magnetic levitation system" that is "capable of speeds in excess of 120 miles per hour." That's what the ballot said. That's what the voters meant. That's what Florida's leaders should do.

Yet contempt for "the People" persists in some halls of power across the state. The electorate -- many newspaper editors, corporate bigwigs, and government officials are muttering -- must have been "deceived" and "tricked" by "flowery language and high-powered ad campaigns." The riff-raff have gone and done an "incredibly stupid, irresponsible, and harmful thing." Having "hijacked" the reigns of power from their leaders, the supposedly ignorant masses are now "blinking through an election hangover" and discovering "they'd bought themselves a train" which could end up being "one of the biggest tax-gobbling white elephants in human history."

Wow! All of human history?!? Maybe a few editorial writers and spin-doctors need to lighten up a little. It's not like we are going to construct a network of Egyptian pyramids, or even another cross-Florida barge canal.

Let the record show that our firm's extensive pre-election public opinion research on this proposal documented by both public opinion polls and focus groups revealed that voters knew precisely what they were supporting in Amendment 1. And even when we warned them that opponents questioned the financial consequences, constitutional status, and

hurried schedule of the proposed train system, a majority persisted in supporting the project. Here is what we told them the critics were saying:

- The state would have to spend billions of dollars that it might not recover from passenger revenues.
- Funding the bullet train will take dollars away from key highway projects that are desperately needed to reduce traffic and make our highways safer for travelers.
- Approving the train would be like signing a blank check that would risk billions of taxpayer dollars on a system that might fail in the marketplace.
- The bullet train proposal requires that construction begin by 2003, and that is much too soon for a project this large and complex.
- Most major newspapers across the state oppose the bullet train amendment, saying that transportation projects like this don't belong in our constitution.

Recognize these arguments? You should. They encompass the shrill and persistent whining of virtually all the state's editorial boards and special interests that feed at the highway project trough and gouge consumers with high airfares.

Even when confronted with these arguments, voters that we interviewed persisted in their support. Why? Pure and simple, it was because the people of Florida have more vision for the future of their state than do most of their leaders. It was because the people want solutions to traffic problems that they know the highway builders will never be able to provide. It was because Florida consumers want travel choices that vested interests want to deny them.

A majority of Floridians has said that high-speed rail can become a reasonable, valuable, component of a much broader system to address Florida's transportation needs. The people have painted the broad vision for high-speed rail in Florida's constitution. Now the legislature can handle the details. But keep an eye out for attempts to subvert the people's will. When you see the lawsuits and political maneuverings that try to derail the bullet train, remember that the people should be the driver. And when you hear the political naysayers disparage the people, remember that Floridians know a whole lot more about what they want than the state's elites give them credit for knowing.

The train is leaving the station. It's time for Florida's leaders to get on board!

About the Author

David B. Hill is Director of Hill Research Consultants based in The Woodlands, Texas. A graduate of The Florida State University, he has long-time ties to Florida having served as a pollster or consultant to numerous Florida leaders in government, business and civic

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