



Polk Commissioners Urge Review Of Rail Hub's Effect

By **BILLY TOWNSEND** The Tampa Tribune

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BARTOW - For the first time, a local government is objecting to the fast-track approval process of what the state has called the "mother of all rail yards," the massive CSX rail hub and distribution center planned for south Winter Haven.

That hub is the backbone of a half-billion deal put together last year by former Gov. Jeb Bush's administration that would reorganize freight rail traffic throughout the state and bring commuter rail to the Orlando area.

The Port of Tampa also has expressed interest in tapping into the hub and the burgeoning Central Florida distribution industry.

Advocates of the proposed Heartland Parkway have cited the CSX hub as a reason to build the highway, which would tie into the new facility.

Most Polk County commissioners, however, now think the state should rethink its decision to waive a time-consuming regional review for the first phase of the 1,250-acre project. That would greatly slow the development's progress.

Commissioners voted 3-2 Wednesday to ask the state Department of Community Affairs to "consider requiring the CSX project to undergo a full [development of regional impact] review."

The question now is how the state will react to a letter containing the commission's request and whether the commission will take more political and legal steps to push for the review if the state ignores its wishes. Polk's planning director, Merle Bishop, said his calls to the DCA have not been returned. DCA officials also have not returned calls to The Tampa Tribune.

Despite the vote, there was little indication Wednesday that the machinery of county government has any interest in fighting for the regional review.

Bishop, the county manager and a county commissioner all said there is nothing the county can do about the project, which is being developed within Winter Haven. Also, the county's economic development director, like the city of Winter Haven, has been a staunch supporter of the plan, even without the review.

County Manager Mike Herr described the CSX project as "grand and joyous thing" from the point of view of economic development.

But Commissioner Randy Wilkinson, who put the letter together, said, "If we don't squeak a little bit, nothing's going to happen."

The CSX hub would serve as a sort of inland port for freight deliveries from real ports throughout the country. It will be CSX's prime distribution center for the Florida market, taking shipping containers from trains and transferring them to hundreds of trucks for delivery.

The Winter Haven City Commission approved the project last summer without performing detailed traffic studies.

CSX, however, projects 1,150 truck trips on State Road 60 just from the initial phase of the project, according to Winter Haven city documents.

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