

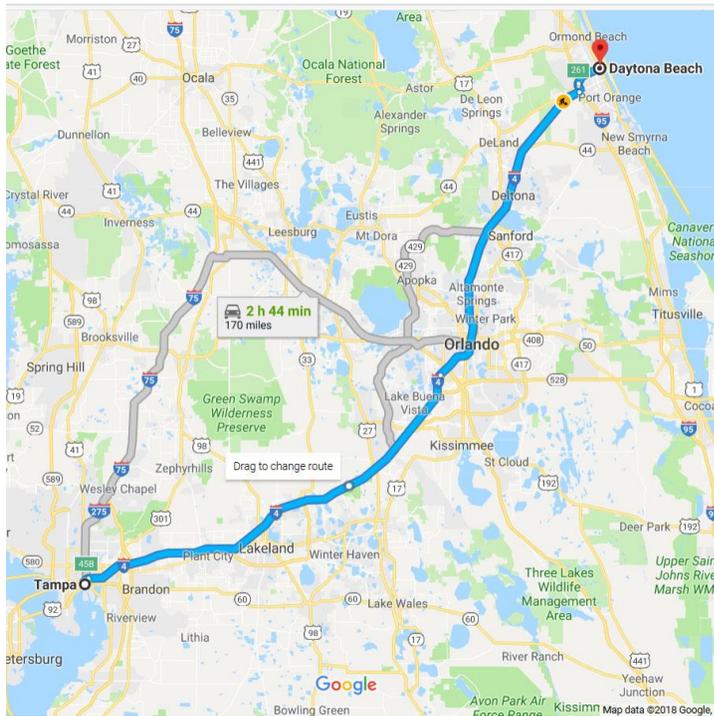
Issue: FL Transportation

## Florida Interstate 4 Corridor and Elusive High-Speed Rail

**Ranked #1:** Florida’s Interstate 4 highway has the dubious distinction of being ranked the most dangerous highway in the country, according to several studies. It has made it onto the top 10 list since 2010. And the most dangerous section of the most dangerous highway in America happens to run right through the “happiest place on Earth” from Lakeland to Disney World in Orlando.<sup>1,2</sup>

Not only does the highway have the greatest number of fatalities in the country, it also ranks as one of the worst in traffic congestion. During rush hour, I-4 looks like a parking lot.<sup>3</sup>

**I-4 corridor is where presidents get picked:** “The I-4 corridor decides Florida’s elections and Florida decides the presidential election.”<sup>4</sup> Republicans rack up votes in conservative North and Southwest Florida. Democrats clean up in the population centers of South Florida, and the two sides battle it out in the high-growth areas along I-4. According to the Tampa Bay Times, the area’s growing diversity favors the Democrats, but white voters have been turning to the GOP. In November 2016, the population along the I-4 corridor was about the same size as Virginia. However, the population is constantly growing and changing.



**Interstate 4** is a 132-mile highway that connects I-275 in Tampa to I-95 in Daytona Beach. Starting in Tampa near the eastern suburbs of Hillsborough County, I-4 enters Polk County where it crosses along the north side of Lakeland. At mile 57, I-4 enters Osceola County and then intersects the Orlando area’s beltways. For the next 40 mi (64 km), I-4 passes through the Orlando metropolitan area where the highway forms the main north-south artery. I-4 then enters Orange County, passes through Disney World and then passes by SeaWorld Orlando & Universal Orlando. Around mile 91, I-4 enters Seminole County and continues through Volusia county to Daytona Beach.

I-4 was built with Eisenhower’s Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, which provided 90 percent of the funding, with Florida contributing the remaining 10 percent. The Orlando Expressway construction began in 1958. The project took seven years to complete and cost \$42.2 million.

With the growth of Florida’s population and the increasing number of tourists visiting Disney World and the surrounding attractions, I-4 is ill-suited to present-day traffic demands.

**The legend of the “Dead Zone”:** The section of I-4 highway just north of Orlando was a Swedish settlement in the 1800s. Unfortunately, the residents of this settlement all died of yellow fever, the last four of whom were quickly buried with no formal ceremony. In the early 1900s a farmer named Al Hawkins who owned the land discovered 4 small rotting wooden crosses and decided to plow around them, making this area the “field of the dead.” In the 1950s Hawkins’s widow was convinced to sell the land to Walt Disney World, and the subsequent construction of Interstate 4 cut through the “field”. The land surveyors made an executive decision “to ignore the graves and build over them.” One engineer is reported to have said, “It’s not an ancient Indian burial ground, they’re just a few old bones.” But on the day the engineers dumped dirt fill over the graves, the deadly Hurricane Donna took an unexpected turn and struck the area, thus beginning the “I-4 curse.” Car accidents and disastrous weather have occurred at the spot; electronic equipment malfunctions and cell phones lose reception.<sup>5</sup>

**The Ultimate Solution:** The “Ultimate Project” began in 2015 to improve the worst stretch of I-4: a 21-mile project west of Kirkman Road in Orange County through downtown Orlando and extending east to State Road 434 in Seminole County. The project will add two new dynamic toll express lanes in each direction, replace more than 140 bridges, reconfigure 15 major interchanges, reconstruct the entire existing roadway and increase the posted speed to 55 mph.<sup>6</sup> It is a six-year makeover that is projected to be completed in 2021.<sup>7</sup>

The \$2.3 billion I-4 “Ultimate Project” is a public-private partnership between the Florida Department of Transportation and I-4 Mobility Partners. The federal government provided a loan of \$950 million. One of the nation’s largest infrastructure projects, it is Florida’s first road project to earn recognition from the Institute for Sustainable Infrastructure for its eco-friendly efforts.

“In addition to building a more functional corridor, the Florida Department of Transportation (DOT) wants to build a signature corridor,” says David Parks, the Public Information Officer for the Florida Department of Transportation’s I-4 “Ultimate Project.” “The DOT wants the drive on I-4 to be just as much of the Florida experience as palm trees, sunshine, the great weather, Mickey Mouse, Harry Potter, all the things that people come to Central Florida for – they want the drive-by to be part of that positive experience.”

“More than 600 parcels were acquired for this project at an approximate cost of \$600 million,” Parks writes in an email. “Some were full takes including structures on the properties. Many more were partial acquisitions, where only a strip of right-of-way was needed.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Other Solutions for transportation along the I-4 Corridor**

**SunRail**, the newest option for commuters in Central Florida, first launched in May 2014. It comprises 31 miles and 12 stations connecting Volusia County and Orange County through Downtown Orlando to Sand Lake Road. In April 2016 Phase 2 construction started to add 17.2 miles and four more stations to the SunRail system south of Sand Lake Road. It is expected to open in the summer of 2018.<sup>9</sup>

**LYNX** is a bus system run by the Central Florida Regional Transportation Authority, serving the greater [Orlando](#) area as well as Orange, Seminole, and Osceola counties with limited service to Polk county.

## The Saga of High-Speed Rail – The On-again Off-again Project:

In December 2010, the high-speed rail project was “shovel-ready,” having obtained \$2.4 billion in federal funds and much of the necessary permits and land.<sup>10</sup> But in February 2011, newly elected Republican Governor Rick Scott rejected funding for the project. Thus, Florida was deprived of much-needed additional transportation running alongside the deadly and congested I-4 corridor. A report by the U.S. Conference of Mayors suggested that the project could have provided up to \$2.9 billion in economic benefits in the Orlando area alone and created as many as 27,500 jobs.<sup>11</sup> The unemployment rate at that time was about 12%.<sup>12</sup> Local mayors and newspapers as well as many Democratic and Republican legislators widely criticized the veto.

For almost 40 years, there have been efforts to create a high-speed rail project in Florida. The quest began under former Governor Bob Graham during the 1980s. It appeared to be re-launched in 2000 when Florida voters approved an amendment to the state’s constitution to establish a system of high speed trains to connect the five largest cities. The first phase was to connect Tampa to Orlando with completion planned for 2009. The legislature created the Florida High Speed Rail Authority (HSRA) to manage the project. Despite a veto by then Republican Governor Jeb Bush in June 2003 of approved funding from the legislature, the HSRA continued its work and selected a contractor at the end of 2003. Nonetheless, with continued lobbying from Governor Bush, the effort to repeal the 2000 amendment gained momentum and in November 2004 voters rejected the amendment. Although the legislative Act that created the HSRA was still in effect and the HSRA had completed the environment impact statement in 2005, with no funding, the project lay dormant.

Plans were revived in 2009 after the passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and the Obama Administration budget, which proposed \$53 billion for high-speed rail systems. The HSRA applied for funding with the initial phase of the project planned for the Tampa to Orlando stretch and the second phase from Orlando to Miami. In December 2009, the legislature authorized two commuter train projects, SunRail and Tri-Rail to demonstrate the state’s commitment to a rail system. In January 2010, The White House announced that Florida would receive funding for the Tampa-Orlando phase.<sup>13</sup>

The initial funding from the federal government along with additional funds that were made available when Republican governors in Wisconsin and Ohio turned down their projects, totaled \$2.4 billion. Florida’s contribution was \$280 million. The Obama administration was eager to have an early success for the high-speed rail initiative. The Florida project was to be the showcase of the program because it could be built relatively quickly due to the earlier work on the project. And the 170 miles per hour train would contrast with the slow-moving traffic on I-4.

## Republican Governor Scott’s “Reasons” for Killing the Project:

In rejecting the federal money, Governor Scott stated 3 reasons: (1) capital cost overruns from the project could put Florida taxpayers on the hook for an additional \$3 billion; (2) ridership and revenue projections are historically overly-optimistic and would likely result in ongoing subsidies that state taxpayers would have to incur; (3) if the project were shut down due to excessive costs, the state would have to return \$2.4 billion to the federal government.<sup>14</sup>

## Many questions were raised about the accuracy of Governor Scott’s arguments.

- (1) Why did the Florida’s Department of Transportation say that taxpayers would need to pay \$280 million while Scott asserted that it would be \$3 billion? *Politifact* was asked to evaluate and **it ruled Scott’s claim false**.<sup>15</sup> His facts came from a flawed study by the Libertarian Reason

Foundation, which used comparisons that were irrelevant to the Florida project. More importantly, federal officials as well as the state's own Florida Rail Enterprise's executive director had assured Scott that the state would not be on the hook for any cost overruns either for construction or operation. Private companies competing for the project would be required to assume the overruns as part of the bidding process.

- (2) Scott believed the revenue projections were overly optimistic based on Amtrak's Acela's high-speed northeastern rail service rider numbers. However, he purposely omitted the other Amtrak regional services along the northeastern route. *Politifact Florida rated his comparison "half true"*.<sup>16</sup>
- (3) Without bothering to talk to federal officials, Scott claimed that Florida would have to return \$2.4 billion if the project failed. In fact, federal officials said that they would have been willing to negotiate protections into the final agreement. But Scott cancelled the project without any negotiations and even before any bids had gone out.<sup>17</sup> Representative John Mica, a Florida Republican and the new chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, said that it "defies logic" that Mr. Scott would cancel the rail line before the state had received bids on the project.<sup>18</sup>

A *Saint Petersburg Times* (now *Tampa Bay Times*) editorial on February 17, 2011 represents the opinion of many Florida newspapers, Democratic and Republican legislators, and mayors: "Governor Rick Scott rashly acted in his own political interests and sacrificed the best interests of Florida Wednesday by rejecting federal money for a high-speed rail line between Tampa and Orlando. It is a reckless, devastating decision that has nothing to do with the merits of rail and everything to do with Scott's obsession with courting the tea party movement and fighting the Obama administration."<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.tampabay.com/news/report-names-interstate-4-most-dangerous-highway-in-america/2300402>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.wptv.com/news/state/i-4-named-the-most-dangerous-highway-in-america>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.orlandoweekly.com/orlando/six-things-you-should-know-about-the-i-4-ultimate-renovation-before-youre-caught-in-a-jam/Content?oid=2372094&showFullText=true>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.tampabay.com/news/politics/stateroundup/floridas-i-4-corridor-where-presidents-get-picked/2301429>

<sup>5</sup> <https://roadtrippers.com/stories/are-you-brave-enough-to-drive-i-4-in-stanford-aka-the-dead-zone>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.cityoforlando.net/i-4-ultimate-improvement-project/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.bizjournals.com/orlando/news/2017/07/20/i-4-ultimate-the-1st-florida-road-project-to-earn.html>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.orlandoweekly.com/orlando/six-things-you-should-know-about-the-i-4-ultimate-renovation-before-youre-caught-in-a-jam/Content?oid=2372094&showFullText=true>

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.cflroads.com/project/423446-9/SunRail\\_Phase\\_2\\_South](http://www.cflroads.com/project/423446-9/SunRail_Phase_2_South)

<sup>10</sup> <http://swampland.time.com/2011/02/16/floridas-rick-scott-sends-high-speed-rail-packing>

<sup>11</sup> <http://swampland.time.com/2011/02/16/floridas-rick-scott-sends-high-speed-rail-packing/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/17/us/17rail.html>

<sup>13</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Florida\\_High\\_Speed\\_Corridor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Florida_High_Speed_Corridor)

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.weeklystandard.com/florida-governor-rick-scott-rejects-federal-high-speed-rail-plan-updated/article/550223>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.politifact.com/florida/statements/2011/aug/11/rick-scott/gov-scott-says-rail-would-have-cost-state-taxpayer/>

<sup>16</sup> [http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2011-02-16/news/os-scott-rejects-rail-money-20110216\\_1\\_rick-scott-high-speed-rail-high-speed-train](http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2011-02-16/news/os-scott-rejects-rail-money-20110216_1_rick-scott-high-speed-rail-high-speed-train)

---

<sup>17</sup> <http://miamiherald.typepad.com/nakedpolitics/2011/02/rick-scotts-rail-feasibility-study-appears-to-be-a-report-from-the-libertarian-reason-foundation.html>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/17/us/17rail.html>

<sup>19</sup> <http://flapolitics.blogspot.com/search?q=high+speed+rail>