

OTHER VIEWS



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Joseph Easley tries to pump a hose to pump water out of his parents' front yard as flood waters recede in Dutchtown, Mo.

Commuter rail benefits far beyond here

It's part of the solution to global climate change

By DAVID GARDINER
SPECIAL TO THE SENTINEL

When Central Florida's officials rolled up their sleeves to work with the state and federal government on a new commuter-rail system, they were supporting benefits that will not only improve quality of life for the area's residents, but also help solve one of the biggest future challenges facing the state: global warming.

Certainly a 61-mile-long rail system serving residents and commuters will ease congestion on Interstate 4 and other area roads, and also improve traffic flow, especially through downtown Orlando. Transit systems such as this one are a more cost-effective alternative to solving these problems than simply building more streets, highways and freeway lanes.

The \$615 million north-south system linking DeLand and Poinciana can serve as the spine of a network that eventually can be grown to serve more of the area. Metro Orlando's current population of 1.7 million will likely double within 50 years, and that means the region's mass-transportation system must be expanded repeatedly.

It is heartening that full funding commitments for this stage from local and state governments have been secured. With the support from leaders such as U.S. Reps. Corrine Brown and John Mica, both members of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, it appears the project's federal commitment also has an excellent chance to be realized through the entire funding cycle.

We can only hope that the president and his successor will share Central Florida's belief that commuter-rail systems and other forms of mass transit are valuable, meaningful components of a thoughtful, modern city and metropolitan area, and that this commitment is reflected in his or her budget proposals and priorities. Recently, Sen. Benjamin Cardin, a Maryland Democrat, added language to America's Climate Security Act — the climate-change bill likely to come to the Senate floor sometime this spring — that would dedicate 1 percent of emissions allowances under the legislation, or approximately \$1 billion annually, to transit investments. Support for such a system on the federal level would help drive new transit systems such as Orlando's.

These are positive developments. Not only do mass-transit systems such as commuter-rail routes or subways help create communities with reduced congestion, shorter commute time and better traffic flow for residents, they are also among the most powerful ways to reduce carbon-dioxide emissions, the main contributor to the climate changes whose impacts will threaten Florida's future.

Florida is one of the places in the United States that is most vulnerable to impacts from global warming. According to a report issued to the Century Commission for a Sustainable

Florida, low-lying coastal areas, where 15 million Floridians reside, could be submerged by rising seas. The state's agricultural industries and commercial fisheries could be dramatically harmed. And the Everglades ecosystem would be devastated. We've already witnessed intensifying hurricanes whose force has been attributed to the increased energy from warmer seas.

Faced with such sobering consequences, Gov. Charlie Crist has taken a strong stand on the climate issue; he is part of a strong bipartisan group of governors who are taking action to mitigate the threat that climate change poses. In 2007, he committed Florida to reducing its emissions of greenhouse gases. "I believe global climate change is one of the most im-

portant issues that we will face this century," he said at the time. Luckily, public transit and transit-oriented development are familiar, proven tools that can be a part of the solution to climate change. According to the American Public Transportation Association, public transit has a direct effect on greenhouse-gas emissions: A single commuter taking public transit to work instead of driving can reduce carbon dioxide by 4,800 pounds a year — far more than by switching to compact fluorescent light bulbs or switching to more efficient appliances. And one person in a two-car household switching to public transportation shrinks the household's carbon footprint by 25 percent to 30 percent. Public transit reduces carbon emissions even more dramatically when you take into account the more efficient land-use patterns that transit encourages: The association has found that existing transit systems reduce carbon emissions by 37 million metric tons a year from levels where they would otherwise be — equivalent to the emissions generated by the electricity used by 4.9 million households.

Central Florida's mass-transit system simultaneously will create more livable communities for Floridians and combat climate change. It can surely serve as one of the centerpiece solutions to the global-warming challenge in Orlando, Central Florida and anywhere growing numbers of people are overwhelming the roads.

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PREPARED FOR HURRICANES?

Missouri flood lessons for Florida

By ROB YOUNG and DAVID BUSH
SPECIAL TO THE SENTINEL

The first day of spring is just behind us. The sun has moved slightly north of the equator on its march toward the Tropic of Cancer. The Northern Hemisphere will receive a little more solar energy today than it did yesterday, and a little more tomorrow than today. As the months pass, sea surface temperature rises with the summer heating, and the ocean stores energy to generate hurricanes.

Yes, another hurricane season looms. But isn't it too early to start thinking of hurricanes, you might be saying? The truth is, we should never stop thinking of them. When hurricane season arrives June 1, it will be too late.

It is not hurricanes that grab the headlines today, but flooding along the Meramec River, Mo., in small towns such as Pacific, Eureka, Valley Park and Arnold. Floods are a different natural hazard than hurricanes, but similar approaches are used to plan for and recover from their effects.

The evening news showed a mayor of one of the flood-ravaged communities wondering why the government had not built them a levee. A citizen of that same community was distraught because her dream home was nearly submerged. It seems obvious that neither the mayor nor the citizen had taken the proper steps weeks, months or even years ago to prepare for a natural disaster that, while not a certainty, was at least a possibility, if not a probability. This is not to pick on a single community, mayor or resident, but rather to learn lessons from their predicament.

Did the mayor or other political bodies

look into management strategies other than levees? How about zoning, land-use planning, relocation? See the stories about relocation efforts after the 1993 Midwest floods — Valmeyer and Grafton, Ill.; Cape Girardeau, Mo.; and many others. It is a lesson 15 years old, but unheeded.

Funds may have been more readily available for relocation rather than levees, for something that is a permanent solu-

Now is the time to assess the potential risks of your property and your community.

tion. Did we not learn from Katrina that levees are not a sure thing?

Check out how some of the levees in nearby communities fared during the recent floods — Peerless Park Levee in St. Louis County, or Neelyville in Butler County, Mo.

And what of the poor person who lost her home? Sad, to be sure, but could she tell you in what flood zone her property is located? Could she, off the top of her head, give you the BFE? Does she even know that BFE stands for "base flood elevation"? It is the elevation to which flood waters are expected to rise during the base (100-year) flood, a measure that can be used for determining elevation or flood-proofing of homes.

Does she know what a FIRM is? Did she inquire with her community about these things? Does the community have a flood insurance study on file and available for review? Did the mortgage company or bank look into these things before making the loan?

And could her mayor answer these same questions? Is the mayor familiar

with the Federal Emergency Management Agency's mitigation directorate? Has he contacted the agency to see how it can help or, rather, how they could have helped plan for today's floods?

Now back to hurricanes, which result in a different type of flooding, and accompanying severe winds, but the same flood-zone questions apply. Now is the time to assess the potential risks of your property and your community. What flood zone do you live in? What is the BFE of your site? Is your house built to hurricane-code specifications, or better? How about your neighbor? If your house is well-built, but your neighbor's house (shed, garage or other outbuilding) is not, you potentially have a bunch of missiles aimed straight at you.

While the Midwest is recovering from one type of natural disaster, let's ask ourselves if we are ready for what is sure to come this summer and early fall. Let's begin examining the potential hazards to our homes, homesites, neighborhoods and communities. Let's also start making plans for the upcoming hurricane season.

While we are doing that, let's keep an eye on the growing minutes and hours of daylight over the next three months. Each additional minute of daylight brings an additional minute's worth of solar heating to the North Atlantic — more fuel for the fire.

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New energy taxes threaten Floridians

By JIM SMITH
SPECIAL TO THE SENTINEL

The national energy bill, which Congress passed last December, wisely took into account the negative economic impact increased taxes on our U.S. energy producers would have on America, and excluded these taxes from the final legislation. Recently, however, House Democrats brought new energy taxes back to the debate with the passage of another bill that again endangers all Americans, and particularly Floridians.

This is an inherently poor policy recommendation that we should all oppose.

Adding new energy taxes to our already-struggling economy is like throwing a drowning man an anvil. The primary effect of new taxes levied on our domestic oil, gas and energy producers would be increased costs for consumers and businesses as the taxes are passed directly down in the form of higher prices for energy and other goods and services.

Residents of Florida, and

specifically Central Florida, already shoulder a fuel-tax burden that is among the highest in the country. The Orange County total is 48.6 cents per gallon; Seminole is 49.6 cents, while both Volusia and Polk counties are at 54.6 cents per gallon of state and federal taxes, above and beyond cost.

When taxes are removed, Florida has one of the lowest retail fuel prices nationwide, largely because our marketplace is dominated by independent businesses, making our marketplace the most competitive in the country.

Still, these price hikes would have a particularly harsh effect here in the Sunshine State, where a large number of residents are living on a fixed income. Cost-of-living increases for fuel and other basic necessities are known to harm those at the lower end of the income scale the most. This tax is grossly unfair because it takes proportionately more money from those who earn the least.

Though legislators may think these taxes would punish energy companies for high prices, they, in fact, would pun-

ish us all. Floridians are experiencing an especially violent economic cycle, and families and businesses are increasingly threatened by drastic increases in the price of food, energy and housing. New energy taxes are an irresponsible policy choice and would only make matters much worse.

These taxes would cost America more jobs in industries that already face staggering price competition from foreign trading partners worldwide. In Florida, tourism and housing would suffer inordinately from lessened demand both inside and outside our state.

Moreover, taxes on domestic energy production have been shown to actually work against our national energy security goals and increase imports while deterring domestic production. They would also increase the competitive disadvantage our U.S. energy companies find themselves at with foreign-owned and state-owned companies abroad that are actively restricting our production of affordable energy.

Both houses of our Florida Legislature are considering sweeping changes in our energy policy, all of which require the use of renewable energy. Throughout our state there are already mandates to include 10 percent ethanol in gasoline by 2010, to produce electricity using 20 percent renewable fuels, and to update our buildings to make them "green." All these efforts will cost consumers and taxpayers tens of millions of dollars; we cannot shoulder the burden of further energy tax increases as well.

Consumers and businesses in Florida and nationwide have much to lose in this contest in terms of employment, affordable costs of living and future economic growth. Florida is known to lead the nation in many social and economic trends, so we must awaken to the danger that lurks in this type of energy policy. Let's tell our elected officials that we strongly oppose new energy taxes.

Jim Smith is president and CEO of the Florida Petroleum Marketers and Convenience Store Association.

From the left | Doonesbury Flashbacks by Garry Trudeau



From the right | Mallard Fillmore by Bruce Tinsley

