MEMORANDUM

To: Council Members
From: Staff
Date: September 17, 2010 Council Meeting
Subject: Florida Passenger Rail Overview

Introduction

The purpose of this item is to provide an overview to Council of the various types of passenger rail projects that are relevant to the Region: 1) High Speed Rail; 2) Intercity Passenger Rail (e.g., Amtrak), and 3) Commuter Rail (e.g., Tri-Rail, South Florida East Coast Corridor (SFECC) Study). In recent years, the State has accelerated its interest in rail transit of all forms, and there are active rail projects underway in each of the State’s major metropolitan regions. Florida has been successful in securing Federal funding for several projects, and several additional applications for Federal funding have been recently submitted for consideration. The various types of rail service are distinguished by different operating characteristics, economics, and implications for land use. Council continues to partner with the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT), South Florida Regional Transportation Authority (SFRTA), Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs), local governments, and other agencies to assist with land use, public outreach, and other aspects of rail project planning.

Background

Improved and expanded mobility in the Region, especially beyond the single-auto vehicle, is of critical necessity. The Strategic Regional Policy Plan encourages the creation of a regional, integrated mass transit system, including commuter rail connections to airports, seaports, and core redevelopment areas.

At the state level, the FDOT maintains the Florida Transportation Plan which provides the overall policy framework for the Strategic Intermodal System Strategic Plan and related modal system plans (e.g., highway, rail, aviation, transit, seaport, waterway). The most recent Florida Transportation Plan was adopted in 2005, which included a 2025 planning horizon. FDOT is currently developing the 2060 Florida Transportation Plan, which will be adopted in December 2010. This updated Plan is anticipated to broaden the State’s perspective on passenger rail as a growing component of the Florida transportation network.

Florida’s State Rail Plan outlines Florida’s rail network, both existing and projected, for both freight and passenger service. In 2006, FDOT developed the Florida Intercity Passenger Rail Vision Plan, which focuses on passenger rail corridors in the state. The Plan addresses broad travel markets in Florida and outlines general travel corridors which could be served by intercity...
passenger rail (e.g., Amtrak-type service) as well as high speed rail. The Plan includes a map of
the general rail corridors to connect Florida’s major travel markets (see Figure 1 below).

The Plan indicates both an “inland” route, which would utilize the CSXT rail corridor, as well as
a “coastal” route, which would utilize the FEC rail corridor, and analyzes the different forms of
rail service which could be operated on each (see Figures 2 and 3 on the following page). The
Plan concludes Florida could support rail service on both the inland and coastal routes, noting the
routes are not mutually exclusive.
Figures 2 and 3: As shown in the Florida Intercity Passenger Rail Vision Plan (FDOT, 2006), these illustrate the potential Phase 4 “build-out” alignments for the “Coastal” and “Inland” routes for future passenger rail service. The Plan indicates the routes are not mutually exclusive, and instead, Florida will have enough passenger rail demand through 2025 to support development of both routes with different types of rail service (some portions at 79 mph and others at 110 mph or 125 mph).

FDOT’s most recent rail policy priorities are described in the Policy Element of the Florida Rail Plan, completed in March 2009. The Policy Element sets forth goals and objectives in five general areas, including Safety and Security; Quality of Life and Environmental Stewardship; Preservation and Maintenance; Mobility and Economic Competitiveness; and Sustainable Transportation Investments. The Policy Element recommends FDOT support the development of “commuter hub systems” as well as intercity passenger rail projects between key city pairs.

Noted commuter hub systems include Tri-Rail and the SFECC Transit Study (both of which are in southeast Florida); Central Florida Commuter Rail Transit Service/SunRail (in central Florida); and potential commuter rail projects in the Tampa Bay region as well as northeast Florida. The noted key city pairs include Orlando/Tampa; Miami/Jacksonville; Miami and Orlando/Tampa mid-point; and Miami and Orlando/Jacksonville mid-point (see Figure 4, which illustrates areas of the state for which rail projects are being operated or actively pursued). The Policy Element also recommends FDOT work with Amtrak towards the restoration of the Sunset Limited service between New Orleans and Sanford, which includes intercity service across Florida’s panhandle.
As illustrated above, current planning by FDOT and other agencies indicate existing or emerging rail projects in all of Florida’s major metropolitan regions. (SOURCE: TCRPC)

It should also be noted that Florida expanded its role in passenger rail considerably in December 2009, when a Legislative special session was convened for the consideration of rail issues. Adopted in that session were several statutory changes, including: 1) the creation of the Florida Statewide Passenger Rail Commission, a nine-member appointed board designed to oversee all passenger rail projects utilizing public funds or operating in public rights-of-way; 2) the creation of a dedicated funding source for Florida rail projects, with a minimum funding threshold of $60 million annually; 3) authorization for the state to purchase 61 miles of the CSX corridor in central Florida to enable the development of the SunRail commuter system; and 4) the creation of the High Speed Rail Enterprise. The inaugural meeting of the Passenger Rail Commission was held in September 2010, and was attended by Martin County Commission Chair Doug Smith as well as Council staff. Based on the Commission’s dialogue and input from the public, it would appear the Commission will maintain a broad perspective on the planning, financing, and development of commuter, intercity passenger, and high-speed rail projects in Florida.

Recommendation

For information only