AGENDA ITEM 9

Introduction

The U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) has submitted the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for the All Aboard Florida – Orlando to Miami Intercity Passenger Rail Project. The DEIS has been prepared pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act. All Aboard Florida – Operations LLC (AAF) is proposing to construct and operate a privately owned and operated intercity passenger railroad system that will connect Orlando and Miami, with intermediate stops in Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach, Florida. FRA is undertaking this environmental review because AAF has applied for a loan through the Railroad Rehabilitation and Improvement Financing Program. The DEIS evaluates Phase II of the project, which includes adding a second track within 128.5 miles of the existing Florida East Coast (FEC) Railroad right-of-way between West Palm Beach and Cocoa, constructing a 40-mile long railroad line parallel to State Road 528 between Cocoa and Orlando International Airport, and constructing a new vehicle maintenance facility south of the airport. The FRA has indicated that comments on the DEIS are due by December 3, 2014. The purpose of this report is to provide a sufficiency review of the DEIS and provide comments to the FRA.

The attached report contains an assessment of the local and regional issues analyzed in the DEIS. The report concludes that the AAF project represents the potential for significant improvements to the FEC railway system and for substantial adverse impacts upon the region’s transportation network; land use patterns; the natural, physical and social environment; and the economy. As noted in the report, the DEIS does not provide sufficient data in several key areas for a thorough analysis of impacts at the local and regional level. Key data and analysis deficiencies are identified to be addressed in the final EIS. Two new alternatives are recommended for evaluation in the Final EIS, including an alternative with fewer trains operating on the FEC rail corridor, with a shift of freight to western rail corridors, and an alternative that introduces additional stations in Martin, St. Lucie, and Indian River counties.

While passenger rail service has historically been supported at the local and regional level, the project as described in the DEIS creates disproportionate benefits and impacts. Areas gaining access to new passenger rail service appear benefitted by improved mobility, air quality, economic expansion, and job creation. However, the lack of access to AAF service in the
northern counties provides adverse impacts from the project without any apparent benefits to offset those impacts. The DEIS provides little in the way of analysis or mitigation measures to address this imbalance. The final EIS: 1) should address data deficiencies; 2) include a more thorough analysis of project costs and benefits and suggested mitigation measures and alternatives; and 3) establish stronger measures to more completely mitigate regional and local impacts and to provide a better balance among the competing forms of transportation.

Recommendation

Council should:

1) Approve the attached report and authorize its transmittal to the Federal Railroad Administration as part of the public record;
2) Request a face-to-face meeting with FRA representatives to discuss regional issues related to the project; and
3) Request the FRA extend the public comment period following the publication of a supplemental DEIS and/or Final EIS from 30 days to 75 days.

Attachments