

Amtrak passenger service closer than you might think to a Treasure Coast return

By Henry A. Stephens

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The idea of thousands of new visitors chugging into Vero Beach, Fort Pierce or Stuart by passenger train in five years has most local economic development officials eager for the jobs and hotel projects that could come along with it.

And now state staffers have proposed spending \$118 million on new track and eight new stations, and accepting liability for certain train wrecks on state-owned tracks. All the project needs now is a federal grant to make passenger rail service on the Treasure Coast a reality for the first time since 1968.

"We are absolutely the closest we've ever been to bringing passenger rail service back to the Treasure Coast," said Kim Delaney, growth management coordinator for the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council.

State and local officials have been trying since 1999 to bring passenger service, namely Amtrak, back to the 326 miles of track owned by the Florida East Coast Railway between Jacksonville and Miami.

The FEC effectively evicted Amtrak in 1968, Delaney said, preferring freight to passengers in a day when gasoline was cheap, the road network was expanding and most Americans preferred driving.

"It was our 'Love Affair with the Automobile,'" she said, stressing that congested roads and climbing gas prices now are making mass transit attractive once more.

New proposals call for improving the track so passengers could get from Jacksonville to Miami in about six hours on trains with a maximum speed of 90 mph.

The project calls for eight new stations — one each in Vero Beach, Fort Pierce, Stuart, St. Augustine, Daytona Beach, Titusville, Melbourne and Cocoa. It's expected to create 2,100 jobs during its three-year construction timeframe and 6,300 jobs through 2025.

Delaney recalled the state Department of Transportation in June applying to the Federal Railroad Administration for about \$260 million out of a \$32 billion stimulus package.

But the Amtrak-FEC Corridor project wasn't quite as "shovel-ready" as federal officials wanted. The state didn't have the required environmental study, leading the federal agency to reject it.

Four months later, despite a new environmental study in hand, Delaney said, the federal agency again rejected the project. The state didn't have the required 20 percent match.

But DOT spokesman Dick Kane said the agency is now proposing \$118 million worth of construction, or a 45 percent match, in the state's 2013-14 budget year. It would come from the State Transportation Trust Fund, which gets its money from fuel taxes and user fees throughout the state. It's projected to contain \$6.3 billion by 2013.

Delaney said the project next calls for the Legislature in the spring to approve the \$118 million expenditure. It would cover the construction of eight new stations and improving the track to increase the speed capacity from 79 to 90 mph to make it a high-speed route.

"It's a possible match, and that's if the federal funding is available," Kane said.

But Warren Flatau, spokesman for the Federal Railroad Administration, said he didn't know when a third grant would be made available. Congress would have to authorize a new high-speed rail bill, he said.

"It is very difficult to know now how much would be available," he said.

Delaney said lawmakers also will be asked to sign off on an agreement with Amtrak that Florida taxpayers would be held liable if a track problem caused a wreck on 72 miles of state-owned track from Miami north.

Indian River County Commissioner Peter O'Bryan, Martin County Commissioner Doug Smith and Fort Pierce Redevelopment Director Jon Ward said their cities' stations would most likely be points of arrival for tourists, not as much for locals hopping aboard outbound trains.

"We don't really have the high density for that," O'Bryan said. "But we will greatly benefit as a destination for people from South Florida and points north."

Studies show 300 to 500 people would get off each train to do some local shopping, dining, lodging or sightseeing, Smith said. But locals could also use the train for South Florida getaways, he added.

"It's an absolutely doable thing," he said.

Ward said rail service would bring a huge economic opportunity — especially if it ushers in a new hotel.

"Fort Pierce won't truly be a destination until we get a destination hotel," Ward said. The FEC-Amtrak Corridor project calls for eight new stations along the east coast:

Treasure Coast

Vero Beach: South of 23rd Street

Fort Pierce: South of Orange Avenue

Stuart: Near Stypmann Boulevard

Other sites

Melbourne: North of U.S. 192

Cocoa: South of Rosa L. Jones Boulevard

Titusville: West end of Pine street

Daytona Beach: South of International Speedway Boulevard at Magnolia Avenue

St. Augustine: East of track, San Marco Avenue

Source: Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council



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