



Jacksonville-to-Miami rail plan in search of federal aid

Source URL: <http://jacksonville.com/news/florida/2011-01-17/story/jacksonville-miami-rail-plan-search-federal-aid>

By [Larry Hannan](#)

Having failed to get federal stimulus money to establish new Amtrak passenger rail service from Jacksonville to Miami, the Florida Department of Transportation wants to spend \$118 million out of the state's transportation trust fund.

Almost all of the hurdles have been overcome. The state has an acceptable environmental study, Florida East Coast Railway has indicated it is willing to have the trains on its tracks, and the cities between Jacksonville and Miami are enthusiastically behind the plan.

But there's a final hurdle: getting a matching \$118 million from the federal government. And it's not clear how the state will get the federal dollars when the current attitude in Washington is to cut spending.

"There are funding opportunities out there," said Kim Delaney, growth management coordinator for the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council, which has taken the lead in advocating for the project. "We just have to be persistent."

Florida could seek grants, ask federal legislators to put the money in a spending bill, or try to get it via a new transportation bill that's expected to be approved this year, Delaney said.

The money is necessary to upgrade the tracks so that passenger rail doesn't interfere with Florida East Coast freight operations. New stations would have to be built in St. Augustine, Daytona Beach, Cocoa Beach, Titusville, Melbourne, Vero Beach, Fort Pierce and Stuart.

Some look to Mica for help

The state lost out to itself with the stimulus money.

The federal government awarded Florida about \$2.3 billion for the construction of high-speed rail from Tampa to Orlando but rejected a \$250 million request for Amtrak.

St. Augustine Commissioner Nancy Sikes-Kline said she hopes to get help from U.S. Rep. John Mica, R-Fla., who recently became chairman of the House Transportation and

Infrastructure Committee. Mica is expected to have a key role in writing the new transportation bill that will fund federal transportation for the next five or six years.

Mica, who represents St. Augustine, could not be reached for comment Monday. He has said previously he likes the idea of Amtrak on Florida East Coast tracks and would look to help fund the project.

He's also likely to examine ways to bring in a private company to partner with Amtrak to lower the price government has to shoulder.

Mica has been critical of Amtrak for not seeking more public partners, and said he planned to push that idea, along with advocating something similar for high-speed rail, upon becoming chairman.

Amtrak doesn't go through St. Augustine now, and Sikes-Kline argues that the train could bring thousands of tourists into town yearly.

The state estimates that 865,000 trips would occur in during the trains' first year of operation.

St. Augustine has designated an existing building at San Marco Avenue and U.S. 1 north of downtown as the train station.

The building, owned by Florida East Coast, served as a passenger rail station before the company stopped offering passenger service in the late 1960s.

Jacksonville would use its existing Amtrak station on Clifford Lane, or possibly the Prime Osborn Convention Center.

Sikes-Kline said she's optimistic that federal money can be found, and work can begin on getting the tracks ready within the next two to three years.

"We now have all the environmental studies done to accomplish this," she said. "There is also huge support for getting this done throughout the eastern corridor" of Florida.

Amtrak has passenger service from Jacksonville to Miami via CSX tracks on its Silver Star and Silver Meteor trains. But the Silver Meteor goes through Orlando and takes nine hours, and the Silver Star takes almost 11 hours through Tampa.

The Florida Department of Transportation estimates that FEC tracks, which roughly parallel Interstate 95, could take an Amtrak train from Jacksonville to Miami in six hours, about the same as driving.

The rail company and Amtrak have both indicated support for the general concept. But first, Florida East Coast wants the Legislature to indemnify it from lawsuits filed because of Amtrak accidents on FEC tracks. The indemnification issue has been controversial; a deal between CSX and Orlando over a commuter rail system nearly collapsed because of the issue.

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