

Editorial: Florida should move with caution to assist with passenger rail service on Treasure Coast

Treasure Coast should embrace passenger railway, but only if benefits outweigh potential costs

editorial board

Thursday, January 6, 2011

After more than a decade of planning and dreaming, the Treasure Coast could be within a few years of passenger rail service absent since 1968.

But despite the growing optimism highlighted during an exhibition Amtrak trip on FEC lines between Miami and Jacksonville last summer, significant hurdles remain. Not the least of these must be the question of whether passenger rail service will result in massive taxpayer subsidies.

The next step in bringing back the rail service, which first arrived on the Treasure Coast in the 1890s on the line built by Henry Flagler, apparently will be for the Florida Legislature this spring to approve \$118 million in the state's fiscal 2014 budget requested by the state Department of Transportation. The funds would be used to upgrade the 326-mile FEC rails between Miami and Jacksonville and to build train stations in eight locations including in Stuart, Fort Pierce and Vero Beach.

If that money is approved, state officials hope it will represent a 45 percent match and that federal funds will provide the additional 55 percent needed to make the service a reality.

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

When Flagler's railway reached the Treasure Coast, it spurred major economic activity around its stops. The freight service that now operates on that line continues to play a vital role in the area economy. Passenger service could also spur some significant economic benefits, including from tourism. In addition, it could prove good for the environment by taking cars off the road and reducing the immediate need for road expansion projects.

But, what will be the financial cost for those benefits? Strapped Florida taxpayers may not be in the mood for spending money on a railway that may or may not be as beneficial as many hope.

At the same time, however, why should the Treasure Coast be deprived of a travel option that so much of the rest of the country doesn't think twice about?

If the numbers add up, the Legislature should approve funding to upgrade the line and build the train stations with assurances that the federal government will provide the majority of funding. If this is to be startup money that will get the service in operation, the expenditure will not be all that large. But continuing to finance a service that doesn't provide the kind of benefits to offset costs should bring the issue to a screeching halt, at least for the foreseeable future.

This could be a great addition to the Treasure Coast and all of Florida's east coast — if it's financially feasible.



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