

## Smooth track is highlight of Amtrak ride over FEC; scheduled service in a few years?

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Amtrak and The Florida East Coast Ry. operated an “extra” on Saturday – and what an extraordinary train it was.

Its purpose was to show elected officials and others, like the media and the public, the potential benefits from having Amtrak run on Florida’s eastern coast – a 351-mile route between Miami and Jacksonville.

No one said which Amtrak trains would run there, nor if a train might be pulled off CSX to go to Miami. Another possibility is extending Nos. 89 and 90, the *Palmetto*, from Savannah southward.

Saturday’s train from Miami consisted of two 4,000 hp P-42 diesel engines, 1 and 67, followed by *Viewliner* sleeper 62020, *Amcoaches* 25081 and 25091, dome 190031, and business car *Beech Grove*, 10001.

The train departed from Miami and made brief stops at West Palm Beach, Stuart, Fort Pierce, Vero Beach, Melbourne, Cocoa, Titusville, Daytona Beach, and St. Augustine before arriving at its final destination, Jacksonville.

Denise Bunnewith of Jacksonville was there. She rode up from Daytona Beach, and she is the North Florida Transportation Planning Organization executive director.

A southbound intermodal hotshot No. 101 train pulled into a siding at Magnolia Grove and stopped in between grade crossings to wait for the passenger extra to pass.

FEC historian Seth Bramson was aboard, calling out the places where the train would stop. He is the author of *Speedway to Sunshine* (Boston Mills Press: Erin, Ont.; 2003), a 345-page opus detailing how the railway came to be. He pointed out, in an e-mail to list members at [FECrailway@yahogroups.com](mailto:FECrailway@yahogroups.com), “May first is Amtrak’s 39<sup>th</sup> birthday and, as you may or may not have been aware, the first time that an FEC passenger train will leave downtown Miami for points north since January 22, 1963.”

Those were dark days for the FEC. A strike had disrupted traffic and many people were fired. Managers operated trains.

Amtrak Conductor D.K. Lee helped people board the train on Saturday. He also checked to make sure people getting on were properly ticketed – an orange pass that stated “Amtrak-Florida East Coast Inspection Train and it had a picture of a P-42 nose on it.



Photos/Leo King

Passenger extra No. 240 arrives at Fifth Street, St. Johns County.



**"D.K.," at right, helps folks get off the Amtrak and FEC Special in St. Johns County.**

One topic everyone aboard the train on Saturday agreed upon: the track was very smooth. FEC has always maintained its tracks, and the proof was in Saturday's pudding.

Everyone we spoke to agreed: Amtrak on FEC is a good idea – from Florida DOT Secretary Stephanie Kopelousos to National Association of Railroad Passengers new chairman Robert J. Stewart. He was elected to the job last week after serving several years as a vice president.

In Miami, Gov. Charlie Crist (I) applauded Amtrak's inspection trip.

"I want to thank Amtrak and the Florida East Coast Railway for continuing to expand Florida's vision of how rail can connect our cities, roads, airports and seaports, and most importantly, create jobs for Floridians," said Crist.

He added, "Inter-city passenger rail is a logical next step, and today's effort symbolizes how partnerships will help make this vision a reality."

Later this year, the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) will apply to the Federal Railroad Administration for funding for the

project under the new Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act (PRIIA). Federal funding will require local and state matches of 20 percent of the project's estimated cost of \$268 million.

Eight new stations are planned at St. Augustine, Daytona Beach, Titusville, Cocoa, Melbourne, Vero Beach, Fort Pierce and Stuart. Major infrastructure improvements needed to implement the service include the construction of tracks to allow for stations, a new connection between FEC and the South Florida Rail corridor in Palm Beach County, and several long passing sidings that would allow trains traveling in opposite directions to pass each other.

Currently, Amtrak serves Florida with three long-distance trains on CSX – the *Silver Meteor* and *Silver Star*, from New York to Miami via Jacksonville and Orlando, and the daily, non-stop *Auto Train*, from Lorton, Va., to Sanford. All Amtrak trains in Florida are operated exclusively on CSX-owned tracks, except for the Miami-to-West Palm Beach segment, where the state-owned South Florida Rail Corridor is used. That will be commuter line SunRail's operating route.

Approximately one million passengers traveled on Amtrak trains in Florida last year, with Florida passengers accounting for approximately 60 percent of all Amtrak passengers on these lines.

According to 2001 estimates, the total cost of the required capital improvements was \$82 million. In 2002, the Florida DOT committed a \$61-million, one-time capital investment, with the balance coming from Amtrak, FEC and local governments. State funds were planned for capital improvements to the railroad and to build the eight stations along the corridor. As with all long-distance service, Amtrak was expected to assume responsibility for the operation of this service with no operating assistance expected from the State. Due to Congressional loan restrictions placed on Amtrak from 2003 until recently, this project was postponed.

National Assn. of Railroad Passengers chairman Bob Stewart, elected to his new post just a fortnight ago, was aboard this Amtrak special train. So was Florida DOT Secretary Stephanie Kopelousos.

In St. John's County, Rep. Corrine Brown (D) made her way to the rear car, business car *Beech Grove*.



***Rep. Corrine Brown, holding the pink bag, got on at Fifth Street in St. Johns County as did Florida DOT Secretary Stephanie Kopelousos and several other folks.***

Brown sat near the back of the car, close to the theater windows. A waiter brought her what looked like ginger ale. There was no booze sold on the train.

On the head-end, FEC engineer Matt Reinart eased P-42 No. 1 forward, and we started moving.

“I think it’s a wonderful idea,” Brown said, about the idea of Amtrak going up and down the Florida East Coast Ry.

“I’ve got a hearing scheduled on Monday on high-speed [rail] in Miami. We’re looking at Florida. We need high-speed, intercity and multimodal. There is clearly a market down the coast, down this line.”

She added, “I know we need to do a pilot program to see what kind of ridership we’ll have. I know there’s a lot of interest.”

She said she doesn’t know when train service might begin.

“We’re in discussions as we speak.” Brown explained that by that she meant local, state and federal governments as well as Amtrak and the FEC, “People who want to run the line.”

She said, “There is a lot of interest in Florida as far as rail is concerned; we’ve got over 22 applicants” for high-speed rail.

Regarding intercity Amtrak service tying into high-speed rail, she said, “You’ve got to have a base. We may be looking at a different market, but it will interconnect. There are people who want to get on the train in Orlando and go to Miami – you know, 200 miles, one hour and 15 minutes, and then we have other people like yourself and myself, that just want to cruise on down.”

By now we were travelling at track speed, which was, in some places, 79 mph. The two railroads had gotten a one-time waiver from the Federal Railroad Administration to operate at the higher speed. Freight trains usually top out around 60.

The view from the full-length dome car was spectacular. Looking on the right, toward U.S. 1 and Dixie Highway, familiar places flashed by.



**Tom Carper is the man in charge at Amtrak.**

Like everyone else, Amtrak Board Chairman Tom Carper doesn't know when passenger service on the FEC might begin.

"Everyone has been asking that, and we don't know. It could be two years, but that's the most optimistic view."

Carper was mayor of Macomb, Ill. from 1991 to 2003. He's also a regional director of an Illinois economic development program.

"An expanding partnership between Amtrak and the states is vital to the future development of passenger rail service along some of our most populous corridors including the East Coast of Florida," he said.

Michael Blaylock, CEO of the Jacksonville Transportation Authority, was also aboard the train. Although his state agency is primarily concerned with developing commuter rail on the First Coast, he, too, has an interest in Amtrak service.

"We're preparing the request for proposals for the alternative analysis, at the next phase of the study. We've completed the feasibility study and now we're moving to the alternative analysis where you really get down into the root, the real depth of how to make it work in the region."

Getting Amtrak downtown and away from its current Clifford Lane station, about six track miles north of downtown is a goal.

"Our plan is we're trying to work with this Amtrak and FEC coalition in terms of getting Amtrak back to downtown Jacksonville by way of Jacksonville Terminal, currently known as the Prime Osborn Convention Center. What we foresee is the return of Amtrak downtown. We see the seven-county commuter rail system operating from that facility as well as the connectivity to the high-speed rail."

The five-car train rolled easily over the FEC's tracks.

The dome car "is Amtrak's last dome car and originally came from the Great Northern Ry. where it was used on the *Empire Builder*," said Noel Weaver, a retired Conrail locomotive engineer who now lives in South Florida.

"The car is in beautiful shape and rode on the FEC like a baby carriage," he wrote on the unofficial FEC website.

Current FEC engineer David Shelley added, "It was built in 1948."

Shelley was the engineer on the extra move south with both engines and three cars on Thursday. Two other cars were added in Hialeah Yard, Miami.

In an e-mail to *JTE* on Friday, FEC CEO David Rohal said he and Carper "both remarked on how smoothly the train rode at 79 mph (on the few sections where we could go that fast without concern for grade crossing protection settings.)"

He said he could not discuss what they spoke about. "Our discussions are private."

The northbound train arrived in Jacksonville at about 5:40 p.m., about 10 minutes later than expected.

No. 98, the *Silver Meteor*, arrived a few minutes later on the adjacent track. In a little while the trains would double, and 98 would pull the inspection train's equipment to Washington.



No. 98, the *Silver Meteor*, arrives in Jacksonville during an interview with Florida DOT Secretary Stephanie Kopelousos. At left is the Amtrak special, now terminated on Track 2. Soon, after 98 stops, the equipment from the special will double over to 98 and continue to Washington.

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Leo King is an Examiner from Jacksonville. You can see Leo's articles at: "<http://www.Examiner.com/x-10977-Jacksonville-Transportation-Examiner>"

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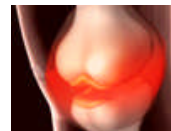
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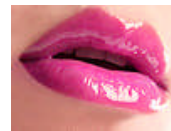
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