

Officials investigating Amtrak switching tracks to FEC corridor to stop in West Palm Beach

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Posted: 9:15 p.m. Friday, April 30, 2010

Your eyes weren't deceiving you Thursday. Yes, that was a passenger train rolling down the Florida East Coast Railway toward Miami.

On Saturday, the same train will return north to Jacksonville, this time filled with state and local officials who are pushing to return passenger service to the coastal tracks. Amtrak board chairman Tom Carper also is expected to be on board.

Officials say the "test" runs will help them evaluate the feasibility of reintroducing Amtrak service along the FEC corridor between West Palm Beach and Jacksonville. Regular passenger service on Henry Flagler's railroad was discontinued in 1968.

"We kind of have everything in reverse," said Robert Friedman, a Jupiter councilor and chairman of the Palm Beach County Metropolitan Planning Organization.

"Tri-Rail goes through the lesser populated areas and the FEC runs through the heart of South Florida."

Saturday's excursion will leave at 8:30 a.m. from Northwest First Avenue in downtown Miami and make eight brief stops along the route, including 10:45 a.m. at Third Street just north of Banyan Boulevard in West Palm Beach.

The Florida Department of Transportation asked for \$268 million in federal stimulus money for the project. But the application wasn't funded when the Obama administration announced the grants in January.

The reason? "The project was not sufficiently developed," said Nazih Haddad, chief operating officer of the Florida Rail Enterprise, a division of the Department of Transportation.

Friedman said Saturday's train ride should demonstrate that the state is ready to move quickly with the project.

The state plans to reapply as soon as guidelines are released this spring for the next round of funding. But unlike the first round of stimulus money, which provided 100 percent federal funding, Haddad said, the next round will require a 20 percent match.

The state wants to upgrade the FEC, which now is used primarily for freight, into a line capable of running Amtrak trains up to 90 mph between West Palm Beach and Jacksonville.

The money would be used to build stations in Stuart, Fort Pierce, Vero Beach, Melbourne, Cocoa Beach, Titusville, Daytona Beach and St. Augustine; track sidings so trains can pass each other; and a new crossover north of downtown West Palm Beach that would allow Amtrak to switch between the FEC and the western CSX tracks.

Amtrak currently runs on the CSX tracks, which veer inland at West Palm Beach en route to Orlando before heading to Jacksonville. It takes nine hours to make that trip by train.

Four trains - two in each direction - run along that route at up to 79 mph. The proposed service would run two trains in each direction, but at speeds of 90 mph, which would enable them to make the trip from Miami to Jacksonville in about six hours.

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