



East Coast cities push for Amtrak from Jacksonville to Miami

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By [Larry Hannan](#)

COCOA - No one knows how Amtrak rail service on the Florida East Coast rail line will be paid for. But that isn't stopping communities along the tracks from launching a major push to make it happen.

On Friday, representatives from all the major cities from Jacksonville to Stuart met at Cocoa City Hall to plot how to get passenger rail service on the FEC tracks from Jacksonville to Miami. It will cost about \$268 million.

Jacksonville and St. Augustine are particularly interested, because both cities think a commitment by Amtrak would make it easier for them to get federal money to build new train stations.

Amtrak offers 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. FEC and Amtrak have both indicated support for the general concept.

"There are a number of improvements that would have to be made so our freight trains are not affected," said David Argenbright, FEC assistant vice president for government affairs. "But we've worked with the state to [try to] get stimulus money for this, and we're open to any other proposals they might make."

The Jacksonville Transportation Authority wants to move the local Amtrak station from its location north of downtown at Clifford Lane and put it in the Prime Osborn Convention Center. JTA hopes to build a \$180 million regional transportation hub that would house Amtrak, bus services, the Skyway, and possibly commuter rail, but it is still seeking the money to build it.

The Clifford Lane station is not in a good location, Regional Transportation Planner James Boyle said, and using the Prime Osborn would encourage more people to come to the area via train and could also help revitalize the La Villa neighborhood.

Amtrak would also allow St. Augustine to build a downtown station, which the city believes would attract more tourists to the area, City Councilwoman Nancy Sikes-Kline said.

Mark Knight, director of planning for St. Augustine, said the train station would be built with federal money. The exact location and cost has not been determined.

Other new stations would be built in Daytona Beach, Titusville, Cocoa, Melbourne, Vero Beach, Fort Pierce and Stuart.

State Transportation Secretary Stephanie Kopelousos acknowledged that money will be a

challenge with the state in a billion-dollar budget crisis but encouraged cities to keep pushing for the project with their state and federal legislators. The Obama administration, she said, has been supportive of rail, and it's a talking point.

"Everywhere I go from Jacksonville to Fort Myers people want to talk about rail," she said. "That wasn't the case 10 years ago."

Efforts thus far to attract federal stimulus money have been unsuccessful. Many cities on the East Coast are grumbling that all the money went to establish a high-speed rail system between Orlando and Tampa.

Sikes-Kline pointed out that high-speed rail will cost about \$60 million per mile, and the cost of expanding Amtrak to the FEC line was under \$1 million a mile.

Kopelousos said the state would submit another stimulus application for the Amtrak project after an environmental study is completed in September. She also defended the high-speed rail project as a necessary link in the rail corridor.

"We need to keep expanding rail in Florida," she said, while adding that state and local governments need to work together to create local commuter rail, expand Amtrak service and get more high-speed rail.

At first, two Amtrak trains a day would operate on the FEC track. Eventually, FDOT hopes to have six. Estimates have 175,000 passengers using the new service in the first year, growing to about 700,000 over time.

The existing Amtrak service had 988,000 riders in 2009; about 65,000 got on or off a train in Jacksonville.

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