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Bunnell and Flagler Whistle-Stop Amtrak

FlaglerLive | May 1, 2010



Thus Spoke Bunnell. (© FlaglerLive)

For an hour or so the crowd gathered around the tracks Saturday afternoon in what's left of Bunnell's old downtown, juggling chatter and anticipation as reports of the approaching pass-through of Amtrak's ceremonial passenger train came through every few minutes: It just left Titusville. It just left Daytona Beach. It'll be here any time. (See a [photo gallery of the event](#).)



Flagler's leaders, jacked up for Amtrak. 'Frightening as hell, that thing up there,' is how Flagler Beach's Jane Mealey described it. (© FlaglerLive)

It: the train that Amtrak was running up and down the old Florida East Coast Railway tracks as passenger trains once did, stopping at 86 stations from Miami to Jacksonville until the line's demise in July 1968. Amtrak is considering resuming passenger service on Florida's East Coast. On Saturday, its ceremonial fact-finding train slowly made its way up from the south of the Peninsula to Jacksonville, though Amtrak, despite Bunnell's and Flagler's entreaties, refused to stop in Bunnell as it did at almost a dozen other stops along the way.

Still, Bunnell took it as a point of pride to do what it could to catch the train riders' attention, even if for just 30 or 60 seconds. Last Monday, the Bunnell County Commission voted to spend up to \$1,000 to [put together something of a bash](#) along the tracks, summoning up every light-adorned emergency vehicle it could, a July 4 parade's worth of American flags, a couple of somewhat expensive banners made just for the occasion ("Welcome to the City of Bunnell, the crossroads of Flagler County," and "Amtrak Please Stop Here!!"), and anyone willing to throng up the quarter-mile flood-zone of attention-grabbing for Amtrak's sake.

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The atmosphere was just what the commission had hoped for: festive, relaxed, eager, and primed for some whistle-topping cheering.

And then it happened. The train, its noble blue peeking from around a bend south of the city, began sounding its baritone horn as it rolled as if in slow motion, slowing down—by most accounts—to take in the welcome and give its occupants time to wave back. For 60 seconds, it was a kind of improvised call-and-response ceremony that managed to mix as much nostalgia as it did hopes for a more relevant future—one with a stop along the train line. As Bunnell City Manager

Listen to the Train and the Bunnell Crowd Greet Each Other



Armando Martinez summed up the paradox shortly after the train had gone through, “This is a hometown community that wants their hometown train back. That’s what they want. They want their heritage back.”

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Trains, of course, don't run on heritage alone. They need riders. Failing that, they need government subsidies. It's the norm everywhere in the world (major train lines don't turn a profit, nor do governments build them to do so, but to move people efficiently, cleanly and comfortably). It hasn't been the norm in the United States, and even less so in Florida, where the Public Service Commission, a government agency, voted in 1968 to allow private rail companies servicing the East Coast shut down passenger service, ostensibly because it wasn't drawing enough riders and was losing money.

But for the first time since the 1950s, an administration in the White House is interested in trains—bullet, long-distance, commuter—as part of the remaking of American transportation. Amtrak's run through Bunnell may have been on tracks linking Miami to Jacksonville, but the rail line's future leads back to, and from, the White House.

To those present Saturday afternoon, what mattered was the immediate message to Amtrak. And to Catherine Robinson, Bunnell's mayor and the day's cheerleader-in-chief, it worked.

Bunnell Mayor Catherine Robinson Exhales



“Oh, it was great. It was wonderful,” Robinson said. “And actually Vice Mayor Brady was on the train and she called us afterward, she said it was great, they were all cheering and yelling, supporting us, and she said that from the train it looked beautiful, she was very proud to be from Bunnell.” Robinson, noting that many representatives from other governments were part of the event, said “this is a county project, not a Bunnell project.”

Besides Robinson, Martinez and Bunnell City Commissioner Jim Flynt, representatives from other governments included County Commission Chairman George Hanns and commission member Alan Peterson, County Administrator Craig Coffey, Flagler Beach City Commissioner Jane Healey, and Flagler Beach Mayor Alice Baker.

“I think it was very nice, and the train slowed down,” Peterson said. “I hope that we got our point across, that we really need a train stop here. But I think the city of Bunnell did a great job with the signs and with the flags. They should be definitely commended for what they did today. It's really great.”

Conspicuously absent were any representatives from Palm Coast, without whose support an Amtrak stop in Bunnell would arguably be nearly impossible to secure: not the first time nor the last that Palm Coast forgets that Bunnell is not only the county seat, but that it exists.

Not that those concerns were as much in the air as flying commissioners and administrators (see the picture above), or fluttering hats.

Before the train's arrival you could see a woman in a broad white hat walking among people, talking them up, showing them 8-by-11 pieces of paper and looking — just looking — a tad out of place. As it

turned out, she was about the only one *not* out of place. She was the walking memory of what it was like to grow up in Bunnell when the train stopped in town—and when there was a town to stop in: hotels, shops, gas stations, movie theaters. “This was the place to be on Saturday afternoon, Saturday night,” she’d say.

The woman was Margie Durrance McCraney, and the sheets of paper she was showing were a black and white photograph (and many copies) of a big group of young people stacked up

Video courtesy of [Palm Coast Life](#).

on suitcases, lined up in front of the old Bunnell train station, waiting to leave: “A picture of my husband’s graduating class in 1962,” as McCraney described them. She could rattle off the names in the picture, and fathers and mothers and sons and daughters of names in the pictures, as if that train in 1962 had just left the station. And she did.

McCraney’s Memories of Bunnell, 1962



Her wish? “Definitely a train station, yes, a train, even if it only stops twice a week or something, at least know that you can get on the train. I know a lot of young people — I didn’t particularly, wasn’t one of them, but a lot of my friends, they’d get on the train and just ride to Georgia, get off the train and do some— and get on the train and ride right back. Just took a train ride.”

Robinson had no trouble owning up to riding the train as a child. “In 1962, we went on a field trip to Ormond Beach,” she said. “It was a great experience. I want to relive that again. I want to be able to walk on the depot, get on the train and go to Ormond.”



On a crossing and a prayer. (© FlaglerLive)

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2 Responses for

“Bunnell and Flagler Whistle-Stop Amtrak”

1. **Jerry says:**

May 2, 2010 at 2:15 am

Video – Amtrak Train in Bunnell: <http://palm-coast.net/news/bunnell-begs-amtrak-train-please-stop-here>

2. **Charlie McCraney says:**

May 3, 2010 at 11:09 pm

Looking back at my high school class on the platform waiting for the train, I think the trip probably inspired me to go on and do other things outside of Flagler County. I did in '68/'69 work as construction superintendent in the "WhiteHouse" Washington D.C. Not bad for a graduate from Bunnell High School.

We do need a stop in Bunnell for the older visitors to Palm Coast as well as an inspiration to our young people.

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