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Amtrak train arrives in Vero Beach to supportive residents

By Debbie Carson - May. 1, 2010, 3:22pm

VERO BEACH – A few dozen Vero Beach and county residents turned out to the Train Station Saturday afternoon to catch a glimpse of Amtrak's passenger train - what once was and could be again.

Five-year-old Jackson Talmage sat atop his father's shoulders, dressed in a train uniform and carrying a blue sign stating his support of the train.

"He watches train shows 24-7," John Talmage said of his son.

The pair, from Sebastian, traveled to Vero Beach to watch the train come in and it would be like to ride the rails.

"Without a doubt," Talmage said of supporting the proposed rebirth of passenger Florida's east coast. "It'd give us access. It would be great."

Amtrak, in conjunction with the Florida Department of Transportation, is exploring possibility of bringing passenger rail service back to life – something that the east had since 1968, three years before Amtrak was formed.

The Florida Department of Transportation has submitted a \$268 million grant request to the federal government for funds that would be used to get passenger rail going again from Miami and Jacksonville.

According to FDOT, if awarded, the rail project would create 2,100 jobs and take about 10 years to complete.

"I think it's wonderful," Vero Beach City Councilman Brian Heady said while standing at the Vero Beach train station when the Amtrak train pulled in.

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Though he believes bringing passenger rail would be a “great idea,” Heady quest there would be enough people wanting to use the rail service from Vero Beach to having a stop along the way.

Officials plan to have a stop in Ft. Pierce and another in Melbourne, with Vero Beach in between.

“I think this would be a real good step for downtown,” Mayor Kevin Sawnick said it could get a stop along the service.

Mayor Sawnick rode the train from Ft. Pierce north to Melbourne during the rail in Saturday.

He said if the train could make a stop in Vero Beach that it would bring more people to the city’s downtown, which would be a boon for those downtown businesses.

More customers at the shops and restaurants would mean more jobs at those businesses, he said.

Saturday’s train did stop traffic at its various stops, including Vero Beach and Ft. Pierce. It waited for passengers to disembark or board. However, each stop was scheduled between five and 10 minutes, causing minimal traffic interruption.

In Vero Beach, police cruisers stopped traffic well before the train crossing to allow the passengers and public.

Mayor Sawnick said while riding the train that he still has several logistical questions like to have answered, including whether traffic would regularly be stopped for passenger loading and unloading from the train, how long traffic would be stopped and what emergency ramifications could be.

The train that rolled through Saturday consisted of two engines, at least three coach cars, a dome car and a business car. The dome car has two levels, offering space for the dining below and a unique vantage point above with a domed roof. Passenger coach cars have booth-style tables to eat or work on laptops while watching the scenery pass at a distance.

Kelly Menger, of Vero Beach, watched the train pull in at the Historic Train Station. Her mother-in-law, Connie Menger, was also there.

Kelly said the thought of having passenger rail was exciting, that it would offer less traffic and more opportunities for families to travel.

Connie Menger agreed and added that the train would also help the environment by taking passenger cars off the road.

“I want to ride the train,” she said.

New stations Amtrak wants:

- Stuart
- Ft. Pierce
- Vero Beach

-
- Melbourne
 - Cocoa
 - Titusville
 - Daytona Beach
 - St. Augustine

Existing stations to tie into:

- Miami
- Hollywood
- Ft. Lauderdale
- Deerfield Beach
- Delray Beach
- West Palm Beach
- Jacksonville

Expected Amtrak service:

- Connect Florida East Coast and CSW railways in West Palm Beach
- 2 trains running northbound and southbound – could grow to 4 or 6 trains da
- Trip between Miami and Jacksonville to take 6 hours

Amtrak Passenger Rail at a Glance:

- **Total Est. Cost:** \$268 million – Federal stimulus
- **Est. Cost/Mile:** \$750,000
- **Miles:** 326
- **No. Stops:** 15
- **Est. Jobs Created:** 2,100
- **Est. Project Construction:** 3 years
- **Est. Annual Ridership:** 175,000-plus

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