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Crowds turn up at the thought of passenger trains returning
By MARK LANE, FOOTNOTE 

Your correspondent was standing in one of the nondescript, fluorescent-lit, first-floor meeting rooms in City Hall on Wednesday and was surprised to find it packed. People were out in the halls.

And this for one of those preliminary, still-just-a-study, public-comment meetings so often held in rooms like this.

But people were drawn there by the possibility -- still a ways in the future, mind you -- that railroad passenger service and a railroad station with the city's name on it might return to Daytona Beach.

You read that right: The trains could come back!

Amtrak is looking at five station sites, including one near the place where the old Daytona Beach train station used to be, off Magnolia Avenue.

That station was a lovely stucco-and-tile-roof structure. It was removed with extreme prejudice -- and remarkable speed -- by the Florida East Coast Railway in 1984.

By then, the building was only used for storage. Passenger trains had stopped running here by 1968.

Daytona Beach was one of many Florida cities served by the Champion, a train remembered fondly by longtime residents but whose service got spotty in its final years.

"There were many people still who wanted to enjoy the pleasure of arriving at Daytona Beach on the Champion after an enjoyable conversation-filled ride," a News-Journal editorial stated wistfully in 1970. "But the Champion became dirtier, its service abominable, its conversation given to gripes."

Plans for a return of rail passenger service have periodically resurfaced since then. Pretty much every time gas prices spiked.

But this time may be different and the plans more detailed. Jacksonville-to-Miami service. Two trains going south, two trains going north every day. Eleven counties served over 350 miles. More than 2,000 jobs created.

And this comes at a time when attitudes are changing toward rail in Florida and there's stimulus spending to tap into. In Central Florida, high-speed rail and light-rail projects already are moving ahead against all predictions.

People pursuing rail alternatives to cars often are ridiculed for 19th-century rail romanticism, advocacy of Euro-style socialistic government spending and just general impracticality.

Yet the romanticism of the no-longer wide-open highway, the need for huge levels of government spending on road improvements to keep congestion from worsening, the impracticality of widening Interstates 4 and 95 forever, are more than a match for the dreams of the train people.

Is it really such a crazy thought? To be able to roll to distant city centers and even airports? Other parts of the country, other countries manage it.

Florida has a remarkably narrow menu for getting around a very large state. Which, for a state whose economy is based on a lot of people traveling down here, is an odd thing.

Your correspondent is not metaphorically holding his breath for this to happen. The lack of firm funding worries him. He'd like to see his city a little more enthusiastic about its end of maintaining a station with the city's name on it -- preferably in black and gold gilt lettering with serifs.

Still, he's encouraged that this is being seriously studied. And judging from the turnout, it looks like he's not alone.

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