



Monday, May 10, 2010

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All Aboard

May 2, 2010



I mean it. I want everyone aboard the proposed Amtrak - FEC Corridor passenger train service.

Henry Flagler is credited with bringing wealthy northern investors and vacationers to St. Augustine over the railroads established to support his luxury hotels — like the Hotel Ponce de Leon and the Alcazar Hotel of the late 1800's. Flagler and his railroads firmly established tourism and agriculture as the mainstays of Florida's economy and nowhere is that more evident than in St. Augustine.

The rail strikes which began in 1963 and dragged on for nine years put an end to passenger service for St. Augustine in 1968, but, over forty years later, there is the very real possibility that through cooperation between the Florida Department of Transportation in conjunction with local governments, regional planning councils and Rail America, the present owner of the Florida East Coast Railway, Amtrak could be able to restore passenger rail service along the route.

Most Amtrak passengers won't have the opportunity to share a train ride with the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the National Railroad Passenger Corporation, but yesterday my wife and I were invited to take that ride.

We both found Tom Carper to be personable and approachable — in fact he came to visit with us, we didn't have to go to find him. That says a lot to me about just how serious and committed Amtrak is to making passenger rail service a reality; but, he can't do it alone.

As representatives from Historic City News and goodwill ambassadors for our community, we traveled south to Melbourne to catch the train yesterday and used the two hours and forty-five minutes onboard to learn what we could about the potential value of the Amtrak - FEC proposal to St. Augustine.

Frankly, I was impressed with what we learned, but somewhat disappointed in the turnout to show support for yesterday's arrival of the special inspection train. I was disappointed that only one sitting commissioner took the ride from Daytona Beach.

No commissioner from the City of St. Augustine Beach, the Town of Hastings or St. Johns County participated. Where was the Mayor of these towns, including St. Augustine? Former Mayor-Commissioner Gardner participated. Amtrak sent their Chairman — where was the Chairman of the Board of County Commissioners, or even the Vice-Chairman?

The St. Augustine Record published one paragraph in today's Sunday edition and a photo of Vice-Mayor Errol Jones getting off the train at 5th Street and Avenue A.

Hello — Amtrak is talking about using part of over \$250 million in stimulus money to pay for building a brand new train depot in St. Augustine and providing two northbound and two southbound stops every day. The closest passenger train stop to here is Palatka; and they were able to put 15,000 travelers on Amtrak last year. With a city population in St. Augustine over 15,000 and county over 120,000, what could WE do?

Of course what we do not want to do is give Amtrak officials the false impression that we aren't as excited about regaining visiting tourists, day-trippers and vacationers as, say, Bunnell — another Flagler railroad town that is not in consideration for a depot along the corridor but who turned out yesterday in full force with American Flags lining the railroad tracks, fire trucks, police cars and railroad fans carrying signs and posting banners bearing impassioned pleas for the train to stop in their town.

City Commissioner Sikes-Kline met the train when it arrived in St. Augustine and City Planning and Building Director Mark Knight and City Archaeologist Carl Halbirt were handing out bottled water and soft drinks to the thirty or so that did show up.

Since it wasn't reported in the daily newspaper, St. Augustine businesses may not realize that they have already profited just because the train stopped for 10 minutes before it continued on to Jacksonville on this VIP - Media inspection. We rode through and picked up dignitaries at Melbourne, Cocoa, Titusville and Daytona Beach before reaching St. Augustine. At least two dozen of the passengers got off the train to attend a function at the San Sebastian Winery and spent the night in local hotels.

We will have more people coming to St. Augustine to visit than we will have leaving for other destinations, in my opinion. The positive financial impact on the area from regaining passenger train service cannot be overstated. There are still hurdles to clear and Amtrak is still in the process of evaluating potential station locations. We can't afford not to be one of them.

Now, All Aboard!

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