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Special Amtrak train rolls from Miami to Jacksonville along FEC rail corridor

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Governor Charlie Crist greets Thomas Carper, Amtrak board chairman. A special train ran from Miami to Jacksonville along the east coast to check the feasibility of resuming passenger service between the two cities. "We see tremendous growth opportunities here," said Carper.

"All aboard!" shouted Amtrak conductor Shaun Robertson as the passenger train departed from downtown Miami Saturday morning, headed to Jacksonville on a track along Florida's eastern shore -- rails chiefly reserved for freight trains.

Robertson's classic call marked the beginning of a historic journey, a special train Amtrak operated to check the feasibility of resuming passenger service between the two east Florida cities.

The last time the densely-populated eastern shore rail corridor had regular passenger service was in 1968. Since then, the Florida East Coast Railway or FEC, which traces its history to railroad and hotel pioneer Henry

Flagler, has largely been reserved for cargo trains.

State and local officials aboard the special train said that if Amtrak restarts regular passenger service on the line, it may lead to a second commuter rail service in South Florida -- one running on the same FEC track east of Interstate 95 and through the downtown areas of Miami, Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach.

The FEC commuter rail service would be in addition to -- or an extension of -- the existing Tri-Rail commuter rail now operating on tracks west of I-95.

While planning for eastern shore rail passenger service has been around for years, state and local officials believe they have a better chance of realizing their dream now because the Obama administration is interested in fostering a national rail system to improve rail connections between urban centers both with high-speed rail between cities and more efficient commuter rail between counties.

An expression of official interest in FEC passenger service was the presence of Florida Gov. Charlie Crist at the send-off ceremony for the special train by the track just west of the Freedom Tower and the AmericanAirlines Arena in downtown Miami.

“Today we're seeing another step that will truly modernize Florida's transportation future,” Crist, now running as an independent candidate for the U.S. Senate, said in a speech minutes before the passenger train departed. “The Florida East Coast rail line and Amtrak have come together. This coming together is a bold step. It shows us what passenger rail service along Florida's east coast could look like.”

Officials are further encouraged about passenger service because Crist's administration last year sought \$268 million in stimulus money from the Obama administration to develop the FEC service -- even though the request was turned down because the project was insufficiently developed.

State transportation officials are planning to file a second request this year.

Crist said he initially planned to ride the train north to Jacksonville to show his commitment to the project, but changed his mind because of the Gulf of Mexico oil spill disaster.

Minutes after the ceremony, Crist left for Pensacola to deal with the crisis.

“Our trip today is a historic event on a historic railroad,” said Amtrak board chairman Tom Carper, who spoke after Crist. “We see tremendous growth opportunities here.”

Aboard the train, as it traveled between Miami and West Palm Beach, Tri-Rail Chairman Jeff Koons said that if Amtrak succeeds in resuming passenger rail service on the FEC eastern shore track, the next step would be a commuter rail service along the same line from Palm Beach county to downtown Miami.

Koons said one of the options under discussion would be extending Tri-Rail service to the FEC track. Koons is also a Palm Beach County commissioner.

“What we've been doing for the last four years, and we've spent about \$28 million through the federal process, is to take a look at what the passenger service is going to be on the FEC,” Koons said. “What we are doing is to see how the systems would work, how the Tri-Rail system would connect.”

Koons said commuter train service on the eastern shore tracks would not necessarily resemble Tri-Rail. It could be a different type of train including possible light rail that is more like a street car.

Koons said there would be connections along the way between Tri-Rail and the eastern shore service.

For rail officials, commuter rail service on the eastern shore track would be more attractive to riders because the trains would travel right through the downtowns of densely populated eastern shore communities like West Palm Beach, Boca Raton and Fort Lauderdale.

Tri-Rail, which travels on tracks west of I-95, is much farther to the west and for some more difficult to reach.

The special Amtrak train, carrying state and South Florida officials, took about 1 ½ hours to travel between Miami and West Palm Beach where it made its first stop.

The train departed from near the Freedom Tower at about 9 a.m.

Along the way, people at railroad crossings or streets and sidewalks next to the track stopped and waved or took pictures of the passing passenger train -- a rare sight on tracks normally reserved for freight trains.

Though officials Saturday were confident passenger rail service will resume along the eastern shore tracks, they acknowledged it could be several years before that happens.

“The Amtrak service between Jacksonville and Miami is the first step,” said Koons. “Once we take that first step, the second and third step will happen.”

Koons said it could be 10 years before local commuter service starts.

Carper said if the project is successful it could be “a couple of years” before Amtrak passenger service resumes between Miami and Jacksonville.

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