

Amtrak service inches closer to Brevard

BY REBECCA BASU • FLORIDA TODAY • May 25, 2010

Station sites have been suggested, financial considerations are being ironed out and the economic effects of passenger rail service through Brevard County are being forecast.

While Amtrak and state transportation officials have the final say, dozens of residents in Titusville, Cocoa and Melbourne attended workshops recently to hear about and comment on the proposed revival of passenger train service along Florida's East Coast, which stopped operating in 1968. From Jacksonville, passengers will be able to access other Amtrak trains to destinations north.

Stops in Brevard County along a proposed Amtrak route from Miami to Jacksonville are shaping up to be:

- The Pine Street historic station in Titusville, which was a stop for Amtrak in years past.
- Strawbridge Avenue in Melbourne, on city property on the east side of railroad tracks across from the City Hall parking lot.
- Rosa L. Jones Boulevard, where a 1950s-style train station stop is located, or a site on Stone Street in Cocoa. "I am hopefully optimistic that this project will happen and I'll be able to conveniently access the train in Melbourne," said Gloria Pappas, who attended meetings in Melbourne. "By 2012, we could expect to see it up and running. It will provide a great alternative to air travel for families and bring in more people and money to our areas." Of the three locations in Brevard, Cocoa would operate the largest station and be considered the midpoint stop on the route. "They expect us to have a lot of passengers with baggage because of connection to cruise terminals," said Cocoa Economic Development Manager Mary Sharpe. "They do anticipate we will be a catalyst for other businesses, perhaps a café inside the terminal, rental cars, taxis, shuttle buses. She said the station also could be a stop for a Greyhound bus. The stations in Melbourne and Titusville would be smaller and mostly

unstaffed except for a short time before a train's arrival. In June, city councils in the three Brevard cities are expected to approve to draft conceptual plans for stations, which then will get folded into an application for federal stimulus money.

The proposed Amtrak/Florida East Coast Railway project has been well-received from Gov. Charlie Crist, the state transportation secretary and communities along the route, said Gregor Senger, a manager with Florida Department of Transportation, which will apply for the funding by August.

But state officials are ironing out two issues before they commit to filing an application. First, Amtrak wants to be shielded from liability for accidents or emergencies along the route, which is standard for the organization. Second, officials must figure out how to pay a 20 percent local funding match.

Redevelopment money may be tapped, officials said, or the state may come up with the match.

Cities don't yet know what they have to contribute toward the match. But land cities own could be counted as credit, said Melbourne Deputy City Manager Howard Ralls.

While Melbourne owns the site at Strawbridge, Florida East Coast Railway owns the Pine Street location in Titusville and proposed sites for Cocoa.

Amtrak will lease use of the tracks from FEC. After

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the stations are built, they will be turned over to the cities for maintenance. The buildings can be used for other purposes, such as tourist information centers.

FDOT previously was denied \$268 million in stimulus funds. FDOT hasn't finalized the amount it will seek in August.

Earlier this month, Amtrak ran a train on a test trip along the Miami-Jacksonville route to see how its train fared on the rails.

If funding is awarded, station construction could begin next year.

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An Amtrak passenger train stops at Dixon Boulevard in Cocoa earlier this month. (2010 FLORIDA TODAY file)

About Amtrak

- In 2009, 27 million people rode Amtrak, the second largest annual total in the rail service's history.
- Amtrak operates a nationwide rail network, serving more than 500 destinations in 46 states and three Canadian provinces. That includes more than 21,000 miles of routes.
- Amtrak earns \$2.35 billion in revenue and incurs about \$3.51 billion in expenses. It relies on subsidies from the federal government for capital costs and some operating expenses.
- In Florida, Amtrak operates four long-distance trains. It serves 18 cities in Florida and counted 988,303 boardings and departures in 2009. -- **National Railroad Passenger Corp.**

Time, cost

- Estimates show prices would be similar to fares for other Florida Amtrak routes. They show

\$60 for roundtrip travel from Orlando to Jacksonville and \$72 roundtrip from Orlando to Miami.

- The train ride would take about six hours from Jacksonville to Miami.

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