

Amtrak plan for Brevard chugs along

Meetings set on possible station locations

BY REBECCA BASU • FLORIDA TODAY • May 4, 2010

COCOA — The Amtrak coach train rolled along the freight tracks just past Byrd Plaza in Cocoa and stopped at Dixon Boulevard. Motorists honked their horns. Some stopped to take a look at the rare sight.

The train, traveling from Miami to Jacksonville, clanked its way through Brevard this weekend in a trial run as efforts to return passenger rail service to Florida's East Coast begin to ramp up. Public meetings on where to locate possible stations in Cocoa, Titusville and Melbourne will start this week.

The goal is to choose station sites and include those in a stimulus funding application being put together by the Florida Department of Transportation.

"These workshops are here for the public to help us understand what will work in their communities," said Kim Delaney of Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council, one of several agencies involved in the project. "Ideally, each community will find a consensus for one particular site that is a preferred location and can accommodate all the components for the station to function properly."

FDOT previously tried for \$268 million in stimulus funds but was denied. It's now going after a piece -- FDOT hasn't finalized the amount -- of \$2.5 billion more made available for rail projects on top of an original \$8 billion.

With the second round of stimulus money, it's possible cities may be asked to provide some matching funds.

Funding would help pay for a train, upgrade tracks, build stations, improve railroad crossings and buy land. If stimulus funds are awarded, Delaney said construction of the stops could begin next year.

"The train would be pulling into a station in three years after grant funds are received," Delaney said.

The two-part meetings involve a public input session followed by a design session. A planner will draw a preliminary design of the station selected during the public input session.

The design will be formalized and brought back to the respective councils for final approval in June before the stimulus application deadline of July, Delaney said.

In addition to the Brevard County stations, other stops are planned at St. Augustine, Daytona Beach, Vero Beach, Fort Pierce and Stuart.

Saturday's 326-mile, one-way inspection trip took more than the normal travel time of six hours because of news conferences at some of the stops and to allow public officials to get off and on the train.

Gov. Charlie Crist attended the kickoff in Miami. Melbourne, Cocoa and Cape Canaveral elected officials turned out to show support for the project.

Passenger trains stopped running along the state's Atlantic Coast in November 1968. Amtrak offers routes from Jacksonville to Miami, but those trains travel through Orlando and Tampa.

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