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Florida Amtrak Needs Push From Legislature

East Coast passenger train generates rider enthusiasm, but clock is ticking in Tallahassee
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FEC freight and Amtrak passenger trains meet in St. Augustine.

Passengers riding the rails between Miami and St. Augustine last weekend enjoyed a smooth, on-time trip -- filled with hope that inter-city train service will be restored to Florida's East Coast.

The riders just wish that Tallahassee would get on board.

New rail projects are on the move in Florida, with a high-speed link designated between Tampa and Orlando, and a SunRail commuter line running east of Orlando. The two projects have received a combined \$3.6 billion in federal funding.

Now an East Coast group seeks a \$268 million federal grant to resurrect passenger service between Miami and Jacksonville.

The Amtrak-Florida East Coast Corridor Coalition highlighted its campaign with an inspection run along the 350-mile route Saturday. Dignitaries ranging from Gov. Charlie Crist to U.S. Reps. Suzanne Kosmas, D-New Smyrna Beach, and Corrine Brown, D-Jacksonville, accompanied Amtrak Chairman of the Board Tom Carper for portions of the trip.

The region's congressional delegation appears solidly behind the effort, with Reps. Bill Posey, R-Rockledge, and Tom Rooney, R-Tequesta, signing letters of support.

Crist told Palm Beach County Commissioner Jeff Koons that he wants to get passenger rail rolling up the East Coast corridor populated by 8.3 million Floridians.

"I want to thank Amtrak and the Florida East Coast Railroad for continuing to expand Florida's vision of how rail can connect our cities, roads, airports and seaports, and most importantly, create jobs for Floridians," Crist said.

"Inter-city passenger rail is a logical next step, and today's effort symbolizes how partnerships will help make this vision a reality."

Carper appeared gratified by the hundreds of rail enthusiasts who lined the tracks en route. The train was greeted by a brass band in Stuart and even a mock train robbery by a pair of horsemen in Fort Pierce.

The tiny Flagler County town of Bunnell turned out en masse with American flags and fire trucks to press their bid for a stop on the line. Current plans call for new stations to be built at Stuart, Fort Pierce, Vero Beach, Melbourne, Cocoa, Titusville, Daytona Beach and St. Augustine.

But the Legislature has yet to catch rail fever. Lawmakers wrapped up their session April 30 without addressing the liability issue that Amtrak and FEC say is crucial to hammering out an agreement.

FEC, which owns the rails, wants to be indemnified in the event of any accident caused by Amtrak equipment. Amtrak wants a liability waiver for any problems involving the tracks.

Unless the state acts -- as it did with CSX and the Tampa-Orlando high-speed rail project - the East Coast line's application for federal funding will be crippled ... or dead on arrival.

And the clock is ticking. The grant application must be submitted by July.

Crist has discussed the possibility of calling a special session of the Legislature to address ethics issues. The East Coast rail line could work its way onto the agenda, but there have been no promises thus far.

Though Amtrak and FEC officials said they tried to drum up support for their cause during the regular session, lawmakers did not respond, evidently smarting from the controversy that surrounded the CSX deal.

But proponents say the \$268 million grant is like found money on the tracks, and that he who hesitates is lost.



"This is a very narrow window," said Kim DeLaney, growth management coordinator for the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council. "We may never get this chance again," she said of the availability of stimulus dollars.

The East Coast rail corridor -- which spans nine counties -- could become an economic engine with regular passenger rail service, advocates say.

Estimated to draw 176,000 riders in the first year, the Amtrak/FEC venture would create some

2,100 jobs, DeLaney said.

Most of the \$268 million in matching money (on an 80-20 federal-local split) would go toward purchasing new Amtrak equipment after \$40 million is spent to link the TriRail and Amtrak routes in West Palm Beach and upgrade the Miami connection center.

The city of Jacksonville says it also needs \$40 million to refurbish FEC tracks in that city.

Cities along the route would be eligible for federal funds to build new rail stations. Most are looking at FEC sites along the line.

Local officials see Amtrak service as a boon to tourism and a shot in the arm for their urban centers since railroads, unlike airlines, connect downtowns with downtowns.

Others argue that railroads are the ultimate "green" project because they reduce reliance on auto travel at a time when gas prices continue to spiral upward.

While support is widespread, it is not unanimous. A few naysayers along the way Saturday said government cannot continue to subsidize passenger rail systems that lose money perennially.

Noting the heavy subsidies that the state of Florida continues to funnel into TriRail, critics say the addition of an East Coast line could be an even bigger drain on the public till.

"I really do wish them great success. It would be a fine thing if it were a successful route. It is just tough to see these things passed through on a purely emotional basis. It reminds me a bit of the 'little train that could,'" said Indian River County Commissioner Bob Solari, the lone member of the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council to vote against the project.

A 2009 study by Subsidyscope, an arm of the Pew Charitable Trusts, calculated that U.S. taxpayers spent about \$32 per passenger subsidizing the cost of Amtrak service in 2008.

Those subsidies varied widely -- from the \$462-per-passenger shortfall on Amtrak's New Orleans-to-Los Angeles route to just a \$5-per-rider deficit along the system's Northeast Corridor, the study found.

Amtrak's high-speed Acela Express, which reaches speeds of 125 mph, generated a profit of about \$41 per passenger in the Northeast, Subsidyscope reported.

The East Coast/FEC venture is projected to hit speeds of 90 mph in stretches, but the frequent stops and proximity to residential communities will keep average speeds far lower.

Proponents say the key to rail success is building critical mass. With the addition of trains running east and west out of Orlando, Florida's East Coast corridor provide a fitting connection that will attract more riders, while reducing auto traffic, they say.

Carper said Amtrak is in a "growth mode" that helps to "stimulate economic development at the local level."

The national railroad's latest figures comparing March 2009 and March 2010 showed its ridership increased to 2,473,551 for the month, up 13.5 percent.

While Carper said Amtrak could use existing rolling stock on the East Coast line, the chairman said "new equipment is needed."

Pushing forward, regional planning councils along Florida's eastern seaboard are working with the rail coalition to host public hearings and design workshops in the coming weeks, while hoping for a special legislative session to resolve that liability issue.

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