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Amtrak trek could pave the way for Jupiter station

By Kit Bradshaw

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The Amtrak train carrying passengers from Miami to Jacksonville last Saturday could signal the eventual return of passenger trains.

That would then remove the rock trains from eastern FEC tracks through Jupiter and move the freight trains to the CSX tracks further west.

Eventually, it could mean a train station in Jupiter, said Jupiter Town Councilor Bob Friedman, who rode the train as the chairman of the Metropolitan Planning Organization with 120 other dignitaries.

"But our focus now is getting Amtrak," he said.

"At every stop in Stuart, Port St. Lucie and Vero Beach, there was local support for the passenger train, with people standing along the railroad tracks waving, some of them waved flags.

"If we get Amtrak, there will be a station in West Palm Beach and one in Stuart, and I believe Jupiter will get a station in a reasonable length of time," Friedman said.

The purpose of the Saturday trip was to show that there are a lot of forces coming together to support Amtrak.

There is "no question the entire area from Miami to Jacksonville strongly supports this and feels it is necessary," Friedman said.

Hobe Sound resident George Reiss showed up with his wife Mary to watch the train roll through Stuart.

"The area needs transportation badly," Reiss said. "People seem addicted to four lane country roads. We have ridden Amtrak and number of times and were very pleased with the service." If Amtrak got approval to run along Florida's east coast they'd use it to visit their daughter in Hollywood, Reiss said.

"The Florida Department of Transportation has already invested \$20 million into the FEC corridor study," Friedman said, "and is now getting ready to move it to the next level, investing \$30 million, which involves studying environmental issues, rights of way, curves, and determining how fast a high speed train can travel on these tracks."

FDOT is making application in July for \$268 million in federal stimulus money to reintroduce passenger rail by Amtrak between Jacksonville and Miami. It would be the first time passenger rail has operated on the FEC Railway since 1968.

“Saturday was an example of how it could be done,” Friedman said. “There were still FEC freight trains moving in different locations, and apparently these FEC trains need to get off on side tracks when they are bound in the opposite direction.

“Right now we have 23 freight trains that go through Jupiter everyday, and 19 of them are rock trains. Just think what would happen if we could get those trains on the CSX tracks and just passenger trains on the FEC tracks in the middle of Jupiter. “

There is another benefit for Jupiter if Amtrak service runs through town.

“We are very focused about wanting Tri-Rail continuing north to Jupiter from West Palm Beach, and we’ve come close to moving forward on it. In order for Amtrak’s passenger service to work, Amtrak will have to cross from the CSX tracks to the FEC tracks, and Amtrak will build that rail connection in West Palm Beach and pay for it,” Friedman said. “That would set the stage for Tri-Rail to have stops in Jupiter. “

Proponents of the Amtrak line from Jacksonville to Miami say it would take about six hours on trains with a maximum speed of 90 mph.

Amtrak Board Chairman Tom Carper said it could take at least seven years before service could be reintroduced along the FEC tracks and possibly two years at the very minimum.

Friedman is more optimistic.

“If we could get our hands on some stimulus money after July, in August or September, we could have Amtrak up and running within 24 months. In the beginning, we’d have one northbound and one southbound train. This could go a long way to have people traveling this way,” Friedman said. “Once we’ve done that, then Tri-Rail could follow a lot less expensively.”

Stuart News staff writer Alexi Howk contributed to this story.



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