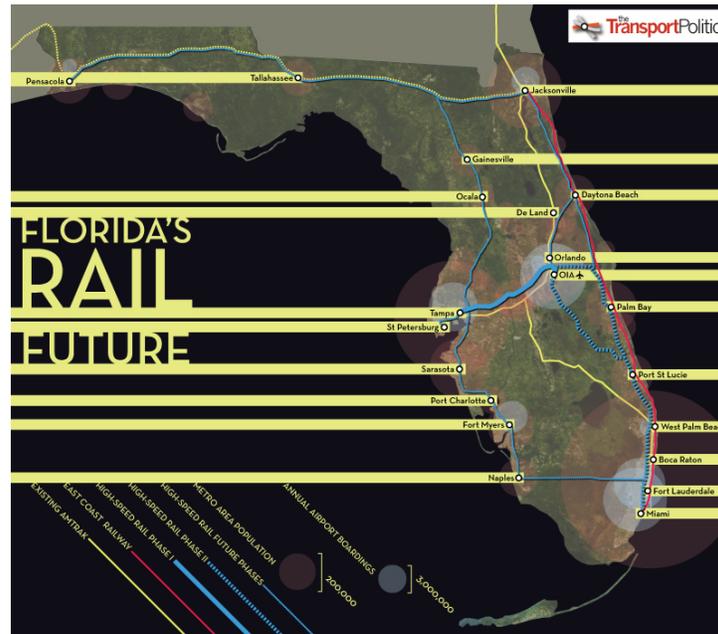


Amtrak Studies Florida East Coast Railway Service as State Advances High-Speed Rail

by Yonah Freemark | May 3rd, 2010
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» **Pushing to establish a foothold in a potentially profitable market, Amtrak suggests it could begin running trains between Miami and Jacksonville in a couple of years. But will it get the lucrative high-speed contract?**

Though [Florida's 84-mile high-speed rail project](#) to connect Tampa and Orlando has gotten most of the attention recently, having received [a \\$1.25 billion stimulus grant](#), the state's largest metropolitan area remains on the back burner when it comes to improved train operations. High-speed rail services **could theoretically reach** Miami by 2018, but with a more than one billion dollar gap in funding for the first phase and a completion date of 2015, the Gold Coast can be expected to wait quite a few more years for true high-speed services.

Existing passenger services are miserable. Today, the fastest train between Jacksonville and Miami takes more than nine and a half hours, a consequence of a circuitous route that includes a jaunt west of Orlando. And Florida's east coast north of West Palm Beach and south of Jacksonville — despite its relatively dense population — remains entirely unserved by passenger rail.

On Saturday, though, Amtrak made a show of its interest in running faster trains to Miami, opening the possibility of better services even before high-speed rail is implemented.

The state has been working for several years on [restoring service along the Florida East Coast Railway](#), which **runs a direct route** from Miami to Jacksonville. In 2009, it asked the federal government for \$268 million in aid to restore trains to the route (not seen since 1968), but Washington dismissed the idea, despite the fact that it would reduce running times to six hours and increase annual ridership by 250,000. At an average speed of about 60 mph, it wouldn't exactly be high-speed, but it would be no slow-poke either.

[Tri-Rail](#), south Florida's commuter rail agency, has suggested it would run services between downtown Miami and West Palm Beach along the route, leaving its current, less-convenient operations in doubt.

The federal Department of Transportation's rejection of aid for the East Coast corridor hasn't dimmed hopes for proponents of the line, and on Saturday Amtrak **ran a "test" train** along the entire route, completing the trip in 8h30. The national rail operator's board chairman Thomas Carper suggested that the company would be able to start operations within "a couple of years" — if financing for necessary track improvements can be lined up. The state **intends to apply** for a second round of intercity rail grants later this year, with the east coast investments topping the state's priorities.

Having received so much money the first time around, however, Florida may not get what it wants now considering the intense rivalry from other states.

Amtrak's show of interest in operating the route provides a window into the company's thinking on its role in the future of American train travel. Though it faces stiff competition from [a variety of private organizations](#) interested in funding the potentially profitable Tampa-Orlando high-speed line, **Amtrak has repeatedly put its name out** as the natural future operator of the state's trains. With its display this weekend on the East Coast Corridor, it is attempting to show that only it has the capability to run passenger trains in the United States. Amtrak has made clear that it is willing not only to invest in profitable corridors such as the one between Tampa and Orlando, but also that it wants to improve services on the state's less popular lines.

None of the foreign companies in line for the high-speed contract has demonstrated any serious interest in the East Coast line. We'll see whether Florida bites Amtrak's bait when the state chooses an operator for the high-speed line next year.

The Tampa-Orlando project has a number of problems that remain to be resolved, even dismissing the system's huge budget gap. The state's current plans would provide **no service into downtown Orlando or Lakeland**, and Orlando's planned SunRail commuter system **does not connect** with the high-speed trains according to current plans. These issues must be resolved, or the opening of the nation's first true high-speed system will be marred by inconvenience and low ridership.

Fortunately, the route appears to have the support of both the **Republican** and **Democratic** Party front-runners for the Governor's seat, a toss-up this year now that current governor Charlie Crist (an Independent, but a Republican a month ago) has moved on to the Senate race. Mr. Crist, unlike his predecessor Jeb Bush, has been a proponent of investment in passenger rail.

But the East Coast Corridor has a number of issues an order of magnitude more difficult to overcome if the state expects to get service between Jacksonville and Miami. In December 2009, the state **called an emergency legislative session** to ensure the future of the **SunRail system** (and guarantee itself federal funding for intercity rail), in which it agreed to **assume all liabilities** for train accidents along the route from track owner and freight rail operator CSX. This was a bit of a giveaway to that company, since it will force the state to take responsibility for any problems that occur on the line, *even if they're the fault of CSX*.

The high-speed line, to be almost entirely constructed in the median of Interstate 4 in a publicly-owned right-of-way, faced no similar obstacles.

This deal was made in the state's worst interests but it was necessary to get commuter rail operations going because of the intractability of CSX, which has proven itself willing to take complete advantage of the government's growing interest in passenger rail. Unfortunately, the Florida East Coast Railway, the private company that owns the Miami-Jacksonville corridor, **wants the same deal**. Considering the heated opposition to increased rail investments from certain parties in the state, it's unclear whether the legislature would approve such a contract — and it's not even obvious that it should, since Florida set for itself a bad precedent.

Until negotiations about track rights are completed, the feasibility of east coast services remains unresolved. But Amtrak may have used this opportunity to wiggle itself into the driver's seat of the state's high-speed trains.



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Alon Levy
May 3rd, 2010 at 05:21 · Reply

1. What's the projected travel time on the East Coast route?
2. CSX could give Florida such a raw deal because it owns Mica.

John W
May 3rd, 2010 at 06:37 · Reply

Awesome graphic. You've outdone yourself.

John W
May 3rd, 2010 at 08:02 · Reply

What possibility is there for forced purchase of the rail lines in question (and then lease back to the current owners with the provisos necessary so they can run reliable passenger rail service)?

It seems ridiculous when compared to, say, a privately financed toll road – there's no way they could get away with saying you can only run busses here at irregular times of day, or that if we dig a hole in the pavement, causing the bus to crash, it's your fault.

For the East Coast route, if the ultimate plan is to have high-speed anyway, wouldn't it make sense to appropriate the ROW for standard rail now, and do everything possible to make a future upgrade to HSR as simple and affordable as possible? Would save all the hassles of dealing with an intransigent private company and would avoid the freight/passenger conflict.

Just out of curiosity – why are they even considering the inland route between Orlando and Port St Lucie? The coastal route seems like a no-brainer.

jim

[May 3rd, 2010 at 08:38 - Reply](#)

States can't eminent domain existing railroad right of way. Federal law from the 1890s. Amtrak, interestingly, can eminent domain right of way from railroads which don't maintain it to passenger standards. But since Amtrak has never run passenger trains on the FEC, that wouldn't apply. And, in any case, Amtrak has never had the money to compensate for exercising eminent domain.

Nathanael

[May 4th, 2010 at 17:44](#)

Amtrak can use eminent domain on rail ROW which it plans to run passenger trains on, even if it's never run them there before — the leading (only?) case on the provision is in fact over a new startup route. It's even allowed to resell the railway after taking it (same case!)

I suppose Florida could pay Amtrak to exercise the eminent domain for them. It looks like FEC is actually quite cooperative so they won't.

Tom West

[May 3rd, 2010 at 09:33 - Reply](#)

The FEC is an unusual railroad. It has a natural monopoly over the lucrative stone market on its line which enable it to maintain its tracks at a high enough level to allow 60mph running. This in turn means it can be very competitive with trucks for container traffic, which is not normally the case on a line of that length. However, much of the route is single track, and it will be difficult to schedule passenger trains without interfering with time-sensitive container traffic.

Consequently, FEC will require that significant amounts of doubling/passing loops before agreeing to any passenger services, plus recompense for the cost maintaining the extra tracks.

Brett

[May 3rd, 2010 at 11:51 - Reply](#)

FEC does not want the same deal CSX got. All the linked article says is that the FEC wants immunity from lawsuits if the accident is Amtrak's fault. This would be similar to what Amtrak's existing agreements are with the RR's.

aw

[May 3rd, 2010 at 12:28 - Reply](#)

On your graphic, you show an existing Amtrak route between Jacksonville and Pensacola. Wouldn't that be the "suspended" eastern segment of the Sunset Limited? Given Amtrak's report on what would be needed to restore service on that route, I wouldn't expect it to be unsuspended anytime soon.



Yonah Freemark

[May 3rd, 2010 at 12:52 - Reply](#)

Good point. I've dotted the line to hopefully clear that up a bit.

Christopher Parker

[May 3rd, 2010 at 15:55 - Reply](#)

No, I think the deal with CSX is what is the standard across the country. Remember if the commuter trains didn't run, CSX would have no liability. Add commuter trains into the mix and CSX deserves to be compensated for the exponential increased risk. If you don't shield them from liability, then you'd have to pay them for undertaking a risk they didn't previously have. Remember you can't sue the owner of the property if you have a highway accident, even if the cause is bad road design. You also can't sue the airline if your involved in a crash — because you are dead!

Nathanael

[May 4th, 2010 at 17:40 - Reply](#)

CSX wanted a better deal than the deal with Amtrak — they wanted *everything* to be the commuter agency's responsibility, even if no passenger train was involved at all, and even if the CSX engineer was drunk and speeding past red lights. The Amtrak deal is only "no-fault" in cases without "gross negligence" and where a passenger train is involved.

I don't know what CSX actually *got* but that's what they intially demanded.

DingDong

[May 3rd, 2010 at 16:48 - Reply](#)

While I can't comment on the specifics of the CSX/Florida deal, it's a pretty bad as a general matter to have liability fall on someone who has no control over the risks. If CSX were liable, then they would have incentives to take the right steps to reduce risks by putting in safety improvements etc. etc. in a cost-effective manner. You could compensate them for taking on more risk (paying them more for the trackage rights or whatever) but for the legislature just to assume total liability means that CSX has no incentive to take cost-effective measures to reduce risk.

Ocean Railroader

[May 3rd, 2010 at 19:49 - Reply](#)

It looks like the FEC and Amtrak will have to go though the process of turning the line into double track. Adding a new train to this 300 mile long line makes more sense then adding a bullet train to a 84 mile section where the people already drive over the space. I have a freind who lives here and he said that most people drive. So I think they should use this new 350 mile rail line extension as the southern most extension of the NEC leading from Boston down to Miami which would make it more profitble then the 84 mile line.

Woody

[May 4th, 2010 at 00:39 · Reply](#)

Amtrak is making nice — to Florida in hopes of getting to run the sort-of-HSR Tampa-Orlando line, and to Cong. Mica, the ranking Repub on the House Transportation Committee, to keep him on board with Amtrak and HSR funding in general.

But who's gonna pay?

Are they really saying they can fix up this right-of-way for \$268 million? (Sounds like a deal, almost too good to be true, compared with Amtrak's analysis of a revived Pioneer, the Hiawatha North Shore, restoring Sunset Limited east of N'awlins, or even extending the Heartland Flyer to Kansas City.) And much of the cost would be Amtrak building new stations? In many other places, the local government has gladly paid for the new stations

But here all costs from federal money? Or how much from Florida? If it's gonna be all from LaHood's federal kitty, I think that would be more or less illegal. As I understand it, the operating loss of new lines running all within one state, like Ohio's 3-Cs, have to be paid for by that state. If an exception is made for Florida, I think the other 49 states would want to secede. I'm O.K. with changing the rule, but that could invite easily a dozen more states to bid for new Amtrak routes, for better or worse.

Maybe they could wriggle around the current rule by extending the NYC-Savannah line of the Palmetto down to Jacksonville to become the third Amtrak train into Miami. But they are talking about two trains a day. Could that be one Palmetto and one Florida-paid train or what?

I do like the FEC route, and I always like more and better Amtrak lines. I'm not convinced it's the best place in the U.S. to spend nearly \$300 million of LaHood's kitty. I'm not even sure it's the top priority route in Florida, with no current service Jacksonville-Tallahassee-Pensacola-Mobile-Biloxi-New Orleans. The fact the westbound Florida riders have to go to Washington, D.C. to change to the Crescent to catch the Sunset Limited, that is not service but a parody of Amtrak service. Yeah, I know, we need lots more rail cars and lots more money, but with the shortages we have, is FEC the most deserving addition?

jim

[May 4th, 2010 at 13:24 · Reply](#)

Back in the day, Atlantic Coast trains split at Jacksonville, one section running to Miami, the other to Tampa. If the FEC was available, then the two existing Silver Service trains could do that. The current Amtrak rolling stock RFP (I don't know what its status is) includes a bunch of new NYP-compatible sleepers which would enable such sections. Operating costs for a split NYP-Miami/Tampa would be very little higher than operating costs for the current NYP-Tampa-Miami route and a bit more higher than for the current NYP-Miami route (since there'd need to be another sleeper in the consist, and sleeper attendants have to be paid). But the additional ridership from (a) a three to six hour faster Jacksonville-Miami trip and (b) two trains to Tampa vice one, even set against the loss of Miami-Tampa riders (which Florida HSR will take away eventually anyway) should more than offset them.

\$268M doesn't sound that far off. Four additional movements on a line that currently handles "dozens"? A half-dozen or less four or five mile passing sidings is more than enough, surely: twenty or thirty additional miles of track, plus turnouts. Resignal. Relook all the at-grade crossings. Redo their warning systems, at least (more and faster trains running past them).

I think you've misunderstood the new stations. Building them is still the local government's responsibility, but Amtrak will O&M them.

Nathanael

[May 4th, 2010 at 17:51 · Reply](#)

If within Florida, the FEC would definitely claim a lot more riders than Mobile-Tallahassee-Jacksonville — partly due to the much higher population densities, partly because the Mobile-Pensacola-Tallahassee route is painfully slow.

Instead of the full restored Sunset Limited (New Orleans-Mobile should definitely be restored, though), I wonder how Jacksonville-Tallahassee-Montgomery-Birmingham-Memphis would fare....

transitnerd

[May 4th, 2010 at 01:23 · Reply](#)

Woody, I am a student in miami from mississippi. It would be nice to have the sunset or some kind of train running to New orleans so I could then ride up to Greenwood, ms. I do have to wonder though, if profits would not be higher on better connecting florida's east coast. Also, this corridor runs along biscayne Ave. for those of you from the miami area you know that is a big deal. I really dont understand why this ROW has not been tracked from Downtown miami to West palm beach to provide downtown to downtown fast intercity rail. The fact that they would put public transit/rail (tri-rail) on the western side of I-95 is annoying. I dont want to walk 5 miles east to get to down town or take the bus. Granted this is an entirely different can of worms I am opening. Le' sigh.

Ocean Railroader

[May 4th, 2010 at 19:56 · Reply](#)

I think extending the Auto Train down to Mamai might be a winner for Amtrak in that the gap between the two cities looks fairly backed up with traffic.

Kyle

[May 5th, 2010 at 00:56 · Reply](#)

I LOVE MIAMI! And Yonah, your graphics map of Florida is amazing, really great job.

transitnerd

[May 5th, 2010 at 11:51 · Reply](#)

So Do I Kyle, but the transit SUCKS. BRT or Light rail close to the coast would go a long way to improving things.

trainmaster611

[May 5th, 2010 at 22:06 · Reply](#)

One of the things that people seem to be forgetting here is that Orlando is the second largest metropolitan area in Florida after Miami and the most heavily trafficked station in Florida. I think an east coast route is a good idea but not at the risk of hurting Orlando service. Not that there is any indication that that would be the plan, its just that funding is limited.

Here's one thought: how about an express train between Orlando and Tampa? You could upgrade the existing tracks between Orlando and Tampa to run service at ~110mph (kind of like what they are trying to do in Michigan). The tracks go through the heart of downtown Orlando, Haines City, Auburndale, Lakeland, and Tampa. It also runs within 3 miles of the Orlando airport. The only downside is that the whole attractions area would be a bit far to the west. I suppose you could divert the train from the CSX tracks to the I-4 corridor somewhere north of Haines City to serve the attractions area.

The distance between Orlando and Tampa is only 90 miles which is hardly HSR territory. And with the inconvenience of a stops far from downtown Orlando and Lakeland, HSR would miss a massive opportunity on ridership. HSR funding would really be better suited to an Orlando-WPB/Miami route.

I've been to South Florida more times than I can count and these are some observations I made about the arrangement of urban areas. The FEC, which is within a mile of the coast, runs through the core of every downtown along the entire coast. The problem is that these areas are largely dominated by vacationers, snow birds, and retired people. Between the FEC tracks and I-95 (and where the CSX tracks are) its primarily low income residential areas. East of I-95 and the CSX tracks (which Tri-Rail runs on) is a massive sprawling residential area that stretches 15 miles to the edge of the Everglades (beyond which development is forbidden). This area consists of working class and middle class residents. This is the primary commuter rail market. Although development around the CSX tracks is negligible, it is closer to the market they are trying to serve.

This doesn't mean that urban redevelopment can't be considered — this would be very much a possibility to revitalize the low-income neighborhoods west of the FEC tracks and revitalize the commercial downtown districts but those are just the facts.

One last note: the FEC tracks, because of their proximity to denser development, are littered with railroad crossings. The CSX tracks on the other hand have very few — most of the roads have overpasses thanks to the adjacent I-95.

Thad

[May 6th, 2010 at 17:46 - Reply](#)

Actually Tampa-St.Petersburg is the second largest metropolitan area, Orlando is third. East of I-95 is Biscayne Bay and the beaches, west of it where the CSX tracks are the major residential areas. Where the FEC tracks run are not dominated by tourists, snow birds, and retired people, atleast not in Miami. Most of that is concentrated on the beaches and areas inaccessible via the FEC. The FEC runs through working and middle class neighborhoods too. The FEC would be a more successful corridor because it provides a direct connection with downtown Miami, Florida's largest business district in and plenty of jobs and other transit options.

The Rail Enthusiast

[May 6th, 2010 at 16:20 - Reply](#)

A better plan for Amtrak would be for them to split the Silver Star in JAX with one section continuing to TPA via ORL and the other using the FEC to MIA. The Silver Meteor would serve MIA via Ocala. Once WI starts using Talgos, the Horizon cars should *immediately* be shipped to FL for Cross-Florida service, eliminating that idiotic backtracking that the Star does and a local FEC route.

The most sensible thing would be restoring Palmetto service south of SAV, but we know that Amtrak management isn't creative at all.

jim

[May 6th, 2010 at 18:41 - Reply](#)

Amtrak can't start running an in-Florida service (whether JAX-MIA or TPA-MIA) without a contract with Florida to do so under which Florida would pay any operating losses. Given present Florida politics, how likely is it that such a contract would get negotiated, let alone signed.