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Editorial: Hopes restored for a return of passenger railway service

By Editorial Board

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Crowds lined the railway tracks Saturday as a blue and silver Amtrak passenger train cruised through the Treasure Coast with stops in Stuart, Fort Pierce and Vero Beach — probable stops between Miami and Jacksonville if passenger service is to return after an absence since 1968.

In Fort Pierce alone, about 100 people greeted the train with waving arms and applause.

The purpose of the trip was part of a review of the feasibility of putting an Amtrak passenger train on tracks owned by FEC Railway.

There was an atmosphere of celebration for the potential for passenger service that is common in much of the nation, but missing from the Treasure Coast, although freight trains routinely rumble through the area.

Officials from the Florida Department of Transportation have been working with local governments, regional planning councils and Rail America, owners of the FEC Railway, on a \$268 million application for federal economic stimulus funding to bring back passenger service to the area.

The Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council began a study in 1997 to return passenger service along Florida's east coast. Local governments were on board for the plan, but negotiations bogged down in 2001 over Amtrak financial concerns; little had been done to move the project forward until the potential for stimulus funds.

According to state officials, the passenger rail could serve 11 counties with 8.3 million residents. Stops in addition to those on the Treasure Coast would include St. Augustine, Daytona Beach, Titusville, Melbourne and Cocoa.

What's next for the proposal? Public workshops are being conducted, then an application for the federal funding is expected to be made in July, with a decision possibly coming in September. Even if funding is approved, it's expected to take at least two years for passenger service to arrive.

No one is suggesting that the rail service would be profitable for Amtrak or that some public funding will not be necessary to make the project feasible. Those public costs,

however, must be weighed against the potential reduction in highway traffic volumes, improvement in air quality from a reduction in automobile use, and potential boons to tourism and economic development.

Will the cost be worth the benefit? That's a debate worth having, and more details are needed.. Those who greeted the train on Saturday seemed to believe the benefits will be sufficient.

Regardless, it's too soon to determine that the investment is not worth it.

PUBLIC WORKSHOPS The FDOT will hold three public workshops on the Treasure Coast: 6 to 8 p.m. Thursday, River Walk Center, 600 N. Indian River Drive, Fort Pierce 6:30 p.m. May 20, City Hall, 1053 20th Place, Vero Beach 6:30 p.m. May 25, City Hall, 121 SW Flagler Ave., Stuart The city of Fort Pierce will hold a station design workshop: 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., Friday, Historic City Hall, 315 Avenue A, Fort Pierce



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