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All aboard efforts for passenger rail service here

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By Dale Smith

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NEW SMYRNA BEACH - Amtrak's test run up the East Coast of Florida last weekend was one of historic proportions.

Not since 1968, when a passenger train made its last journey on the Florida East Coast rails, has a train ride generated so much excitement.

City, state and rail officials joined Amtrak supporters on Saturday for an inspection trip from Miami in the hopes of drawing support and awareness for the resumption of passenger rail service via Amtrak.

Several local communities are hoping for a station stop that would link them with six other southern cities that already have them.

Cities angling for a stop include Stuart, Fort Pierce, Vero Beach, Melbourne, Cocoa, Titusville, Daytona Beach and St. Augustine.

While New Smyrna Beach is not on the list for a stop right now, supporters are hoping to make it happen in the future.

The Obama administration has made \$8 billion available for high-speed and inter-city rail in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

The \$268 million Amtrak/FEC Corridor Project, covering 326-miles, will provide rail transit

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service to 11 counties and serve more than eight million Floridians on the East Coast.

Amtrak/FEC applied for the stimulus money in September 2009. But that grant was awarded to SunRail (a commuter rail line) from Orlando to Tampa instead.

Amtrak and federal legislators plan to submit another application in mid-July for the same amount, but will require a 20-percent match from FDOT and the cities to fund station construction.

The \$268 million will cover the railroad stations and track upgrades for trains traveling up to 90 mph.

Amtrak did not stop in New Smyrna Beach last Saturday on its journey north, but supporters lined the railroad tracks at the former Dunn Lumber Company property at Canal Street and U.S. Route 1 and cheered as it sped through town.

Congresswoman Susanne Kosmas of New Smyrna Beach boarded the train in Titusville and rode the rails to Daytona Beach.

Flare Elliott, a New Smyrna Beach businesswoman and a member of Friends of Historic Canal Street, hopped the train in Daytona Beach and got off in St. Augustine, where a red carpet welcome reception was waiting for the riders.

"Riding the Amtrak inspection train was a kaleidoscope of Florida's railroad past, present and future," Ms. Elliott said.

She said she thought the media coverage, speeches, commemorative souvenirs and VIP receptions, were probably "similar to the euphoria created for the 19th century inaugural run of Henry Flagler's fabled East Coast Railroad."

Ms. Elliott said FDOT and the Regional Planning Councils are working 24/7 to meet the environmental and station planning requirements for the mid-July federal grant application.

One of the top priorities for cities seeking federal transit money is to have projects "shovel-ready."

In order for this to happen, 32 workshops, facilitated by the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council, will be held in eight cities and are expected to be completed by June 30.

Daytona Beach was among the first cities on the East Coast to get on board with the project.

The Daytona Beach City Commission passed an ordinance announcing support for the project on Sept. 9, 2009.

Daytona Beach plans two workshops at City Hall. A public works session will be held on May 12, from 6-8 p.m., and a station design public session will be held on May 13, from 11:a.m.-2 a.m.

Federal and state legislators must work to resolve any issues by July for the current application to succeed, Ms. Elliott said.

"East Coast residents need to urge their legislators to ensure the grant fund award," she said. "We applaud Mayor Adam Barringer for including our city in this dynamic partnership by endorsing the Amtrak/FEC coalition efforts and initiating rail planning activities for New Smyrna Beach."

FDOT, Amtrak and Rail America (owners of the FEC railway) will hopefully see their efforts come to fruition with a projected completion date of October 2012.

The rail project is expected to create more than 2,000 jobs during its initiation of service now through 2012 with more than 6,000 jobs overall through 2025.



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