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New Miami-Orlando passenger rail service would build big downtown station

In an environmental assessment report, the privately financed All Aboard Florida outlines its preferred downtown locations for new train stations in Miami, Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach.

By Andres Viglucci

All Aboard Florida, the proposed passenger rail service between Miami and Orlando, would build a big new train station with tracks elevated on a platform four stories up on mostly vacant land between the Government Center and Overtown Metrorail stations in downtown Miami, a report newly issued by the company says.

In an exhaustive environmental assessment report to federal regulators, the company, a subsidiary of Florida East Coast Industries, lays out its preferred location and schematic outlines for three new stations that could become landmarks not just in Miami, but also in the heart of downtown Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach.

The Miami station, by far the largest of the three, would provide train passengers with “a panoramic entry into the city” and “a celebrated piece of engineering and architecture,” the report by an All Aboard consultant says. The station would be designed by the noted firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill — architects of the signature Southeast Financial Center in Miami and the new Freedom Tower on the site of the World Trade Center in Manhattan — in collaboration with the Miami firm Zyscovich Architects.

That station project would occupy nine acres owned by Florida East Coast and could also encompass two midrise towers for hotel, residential and office use, extensive retail and a garage for 1,050 cars, according to the report. The property was the site of the original train station serving industrialist Henry Flagler’s railroad, which gave rise to the city of Miami. The FEC is the successor to Flagler’s rail company.

In Fort Lauderdale, the contemplated station and train platform would rise on the north side of Broward Boulevard between Northwest Second and First avenues, and the West Palm station would occupy the corner of Quadrille Boulevard and Evernia Street, north of the City Place redevelopment and just west of the resurgent Clematis Street district.

All Aboard and its consultant chose the station locations and layouts from several possibilities as the most feasible, in part because these would eliminate or minimize street closures and traffic delays at busy intersections, the report says.

An All Aboard executive declined comment on the report, noting it is in a 30-day public comment period that precludes proponents from influencing public opinion. All Aboard vice president Husein Cumber said the detailed report, which covers potential impacts on noise, auto traffic, street-crossing safety and waterways and the natural environment, “speaks for itself.”

Because the passenger service would double-track existing right of way on which an FEC affiliate already runs cargo trains, All Aboard executives have previously said they don’t expect major impacts. Waits for trains to clear street crossings would be just 52 seconds, for instance, the report estimates.

The Fort Lauderdale and West Palm stations straddle existing tracks. The Miami station would connect to existing tracks at Northwest Eighth Street, where the FEC rail line bends northward from its terminus at the Port of Miami.

Raising the Miami station platform and tracks in the air would keep two principal east-west streets, Northwest Fifth and Sixth, open and uninterrupted by train traffic, the report says — as well as provide passengers a dramatic arrival in Miami. The elevated “viaduct” would also hurdle over the Metromover guideway and station at Northwest Fifth Street, avoiding the need to reconfigure it.

The 60,000-square-foot station’s main hall would be “light-filled” and occupy the space below the platform, the report says. The main entrance would sit across from the new U.S. Courthouse on Northwest First Avenue.

The FEC announced it would proceed with building the passenger service in March following months of study. The company says it will finance and run the \$1 billion rail line privately and without public subsidies, expressing confidence that an attractive and frequent train service can siphon off enough of the 50 million tourists, Floridians and business people who now fly or drive between Miami and Orlando to turn a profit.

All Aboard would also build a new rail spur between Cocoa Beach and the Orlando airport, where a planned multimodal center would connect to a new local rail-transit line. The company wants to use public right-of-way along the Beachline Expressway, but the state says it’s required to consider competing bids. Responses to a request for proposals are due Dec. 7.

The company hopes to launch trains in 2014 with hourly service and a three-hour travel time between Miami and Orlando.

Amtrak now provides twice daily service from Miami but it can take longer than five hours to reach Orlando.