



South Florida East Coast Corridor Study Editorial

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Rail: An historic promise

Last year, Florida had a chance to make history by constructing what would have been the first leg of a national high-speed rail network, helping America play catch-up with Europe and Asia.

Unfortunately, Gov. Rick Scott derailed the worthwhile project, allowing California to snare our \$2 billion in stimulus funds and the jobs that went with it.

Fortunately, the shortsighted governor did not kill the belief that long-distance passenger rail could be operated at a profit.

Enter Florida East Coast Industries, which promises to use its own money to build and operate a passenger train service that whisks travelers between downtown Miami and Orlando International Airport — with stops in Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach — in three hours.

While not true high-speed rail, which would have reached speeds of up to 200 mph, the All Aboard Florida project is attempting to prove that private enterprise can build inter-city passenger rail service without seeking taxpayer money for construction or operations.

If it sounds too good to be true, it's because a lot of the details remain unknown and legitimate concerns exist about the firm's ability to make good on its claims.

Still, remarkably, it's the first time we've heard a private company promise to build infrastructure for public transportation. Think about it. Government has always built highways, airports and seaports. Even the railroads have a history of securing taxpayer dollars to build the infrastructure needed to move freight.

But Florida East Coast Industries is promising to turn conventional wisdom on its ear. The privately owned rail-and-development firm wants to use its existing freight-rail corridor to run 32 passenger trains a day as an alternative to the four-hour-plus drive between Miami and Orlando.

While vague on ticket costs, it says prices will be competitive with those of a four-hour drive or an airline ticket.

The firm believes there's money to be made on Florida residents, business travelers and visiting tourists, who will ride trains that reach speeds of up to 79 mph in South Florida, and up to 110 mph outside the region. It expects to draw customers by offering convenient round-trip schedules and amenities such as fine dining and Wi-Fi. To bolster its rail operations — and potential profits — FECI plans mixed-use developments around its stations. Plans for its Miami terminal include a hotel, 400 residential units and almost 500,000 square feet of office and retail space.

The response from South Florida's business leaders, elected officials and environmentalists has been largely favorable, although outstanding issues must be resolved before the project can move forward.

The first involves obtaining state approval to lease the land along State Road 528 — the Beachline Expressway — between the Orlando airport and a connection with its trackline near Cocoa. Also, negotiations are ongoing to determine the site of the Broward County station, and the potential impact on local traffic, since all major east-west thoroughfares cross the tracks at grade level.

Perhaps the biggest concern, though, is the company's pending application to the Federal Railroad Administration for funding to construct the project. FECI officials insist the application is for a hip-pocket loan that would pay for unexpected expenses. They won't say how much they're requesting — the amount is rumored to be somewhere between \$1.5 billion and \$2 billion — but accepting the loan would tarnish the company's claim of steering clear of public money.

Still, there's a lot to like about All Aboard Florida, an idea that puts the state in position to showcase what private industry can provide for passenger rail.

Florida missed one opportunity to create an exciting alternative for transportation between regions. So long as Florida East Coast Industries lives up to its promise, the state should do what it can to encourage the plan's promising possibilities.