



South Florida East Coast Corridor Study News Clip

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All Aboard Florida confirms West Palm station, clears environmental hurdle

By Emily Roach

Top company officials confirmed Monday that the All Aboard Florida passenger rail line will build a station and platform at Datura and Evernia streets in downtown West Palm Beach.

As first reported in *The Palm Beach Post*, an offshoot of Florida East Coast Industries bought the old Sewell Hardware property in the 500 block of Evernia Street. The company had declined to say whether that would be the station location for the express rail, which is expected to transport tourists and business people between Miami and Orlando in about three hours.

The station will be built on the property with an overpass at the tracks that will allow space underneath for a possible frontage road, since Datura and Evernia will be blocked at the tracks by an 800-foot platform.

“This is the most unique infrastructure project in the United States,” Florida East Coast Industries President and CEO Vincent Signorello told *The Post*’s editorial board Monday. “It’s a private entity that is committing billions of dollars of capital to build a rail infrastructure. The last time it happened was when Henry Flagler did it in the late 1800s.”

Because the \$1.5 billion project is being undertaken by the company that owns the rights of way from Miami to Cocoa and is seeking no grant money or up-front public funding, the schedule is accelerated. The passenger railway is expected to be running by the end of 2015, FECI Executive Vice President Husein Cumber said.

All Aboard Florida plans to navigate all the federal, state and local planning for environmental, land use and zoning by the end of this year to keep the Miami-to-Orlando express passenger rail line on track. That includes a second environmental assessment that will cover the entire route from Miami to Orlando.

Recently the Federal Railroad Administration gave a pass to the company’s environmental assessment from Miami to West Palm Beach, determining that sending nine-car trains up and

down the tracks 16 times a day on the Florida East Coast Railway tracks would have “no significant impact.”

The passenger railway company completed the assessment so it could apply for a federal loan for some or all of its plans to upgrade the tracks and buy 10 sets of diesel-engine trains. Signorello said the company has not decided whether it will use a federal railway financing program. FECI is the parent company of All Aboard Florida.

In fact, the Federal Railroad Administration’s conclusion was that passenger rail would help goals of downtown development in each of the rail line’s South Florida stops — Miami, Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach — as well as take cars off the road between South and Central Florida, an environmental win.

West Palm Beach’s Downtown Development Authority Executive Director Rafael Clemente said All Aboard Florida’s commitment to buying land and developing there may help kick-start other business. The station is in a special zone that allows building to 25 stories, though Aboard Florida officials said they did not anticipate building that much capacity.

“Clematis to CityPlace and west of Dixie [Highway] is ripe for development,” Clemente said. “So this is going to be a key piece of that.”

A total of 88 comments were received from public officials and citizens: 84 were in support, three were opposed and one offered no position.

One West Palm Beach man who opposed the project was concerned his apartment building was in an area that would be subject to train noise, but he was told it was not. Noise from the warning horns may become an issue, but quiet zones are now allowed along the FEC corridor.

The Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council, which has overseen a study of potential station locations for shorter-distance passenger rail on the FEC corridor, signed off on the environmental assessment.

Kim Delaney, strategic development coordinator for the council, said All Aboard Florida’s work will make it easier to bring other passenger rail to the FEC corridor. And it could bring more satellite offices to West Palm Beach from firms established in Miami or Orlando, she said.

The South Florida Regional Transportation Authority, which runs Tri-Rail commuter rail on the old CSX corridor endorsed the project although it pointed out that neither the impact to Tri-Rail nor to Amtrak was studied.

The Federal Railroad Administration finding advises All Aboard Florida to follow through on its plans to communicate with Regional Transportation Authority.

The passenger trains will be less than 1,000 feet long compared to the freight trains that average 8,837 feet, according to the environmental assessment. The trains will clear crossings in less than a minute.

Signorello and Cumber said lease negotiations to use the Beachline Expressway rights of way to build tracks linking Cocoa and Orlando should wrap up next month.