

Waiting for the Train

Written by Terence Cantarella, Photos by Silvia Ros
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Bumper-to-bumper commute driving you crazy? Ride the rails!



You're trapped in your metal box, shipwrecked with a throng of cheerless humanity on a soulless stretch of I-95 or Biscayne Boulevard, somewhere between Aventura and downtown Miami, and the traffic is creeping along at glacial speed. On some days, you can almost feel the hours of your life leaching out and you wonder how it is that America's playground became America's parking lot.

A set of railway tracks appears, sometimes snaking alongside the Boulevard, sometimes striking off into the urban jungle. Only rarely do you see a train on them. And again you begin to wonder: What if a passenger train rode those rails? What if you could save yourself time, money, gas, and frustration, gliding to your Brickell office on rails instead of drowning in this slow-moving river of steel?

If the Florida Department of Transportation has its way, and gets enough money, that vision could become a reality. The state, like much of the nation, wants to turn back the clock and revive the greatly neglected passenger-rail industry.

There was a time, you see, when American life revolved around trains. For more than a century, from before the Civil War until after WW II, nearly every long journey on land began and ended at a railway platform. From the romantic steam engines of the Gilded Age to the stainless-steel streamliners of the mid-Twentieth Century, trains were fixtures in everyday life that captured imaginations and came to represent freedom, opportunity, and progress. Wherever the railroad went, new settlements, new industry, and a new way of life followed.

South Florida, perhaps more than any other region in the U.S., owes its very existence to the railroad. The Florida East Coast Railway (FEC), which runs along the coast from Jacksonville to Miami -- and until 1935, to Key West -- transformed the once inaccessible southern peninsula into a booming tri-county megalopolis. And the man who laid the tracks in the late 1800s, oil and hotel magnate Henry Flagler, earned himself the illustrious title "Father of Miami" for bringing the city to life and shaping an entire region with his twin ribbons of steel.

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But despite 112 years of active service, which continues to this day, a passenger train has not ridden the FEC rails since 1968. What was once known as “America’s Speedway to Sunshine” now carries nothing but freight. And although talk of placing commuter trains on the rails has come and gone over the years, no new transit service has materialized in more than three decades, since a violent strike of the United Transportation Workers prompted FEC officials to discontinue passenger service, which had already become difficult and unprofitable to operate under intense government regulations and growing competition from airlines and automobiles.

Today an FDOT study known as the South Florida East Coast Corridor Transit Analysis, which began in 2005 and will be completed late this year or early 2010, looks to finally answer the question of how best to utilize the FEC rail corridor for commuter transit. The goal is to reduce congestion along I-95 and U.S. 1 (Biscayne Boulevard) by utilizing the southernmost 85 miles of the FEC corridor, from Flagler Street in downtown Miami to Indiantown Road in Palm Beach County.

In Miami-Dade County, the tracks mostly parallel Biscayne Boulevard on their way to downtown, where a bustling, six-track passenger station once stood just north of the county courthouse, linking Miami to New York’s Grand Central Station. The Miami station was demolished years ago, and the remaining tracks turn eastward at NE 7th Street, skirting the Freedom Tower and crossing by bridge over Biscayne Bay to the Port of Miami. A padlocked gate blocks access to the railway bridge, which opens just once a week to allow an FEC freight train to pass. That single, weekly train currently handles some eight percent of the port’s cargo.

Farther north, a spur heads west along NE 73rd Street to the FEC’s 432-acre Hialeah Yard northwest of Miami International Airport -- one of the nation’s busiest shipping yards. Another spur continues on through Medley, where rock trains pick up crushed limestone and other aggregates from the eastern edges of the Everglades. Other than the weekly run to the port, trains rarely stray south of 73rd Street anymore, and the tracks below that point morph into a lonely stretch of tall grass, rubbish-strewn lots, graffiti-covered warehouses, and the occasional homeless man curled up on an old mattress.

In all, the FEC’s north-south line passes through the downtowns of 28 cities and towns in the tri-county region, traversing one of the nation’s most densely populated and congested corridors. Hence the logic of studying rail-transit possibilities. “We got through phase one of the study,” says Scott Seeburger, project manager at FDOT’s District 4 office, “and now we’re going to go full force with phase two.” Phase one evaluated the environmental, social, and economic impacts of various transit technologies (rapid-rail, light-rail, streetcars). Phase two will analyze details like operations and passenger-station sites, resulting in a specific plan, which will be

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submitted to the Federal Transit Administration. If that agency gives the nod of approval to the project, the state will become eligible for federal funding. Engineering and construction could begin soon thereafter.

Of course, whether any of that actually means anything for the future of local rail transit is unclear. Protracted studies of commuter-rail proposals have come and gone over the decades. A high-speed bullet train linking Miami, Orlando, and Tampa was shot down just five months before construction was to begin in 2003. Baylink, the proposed trolley project between Miami and Miami Beach along the MacArthur Causeway, has been postponed until 2022. And construction of 88.9 miles of new Metrorail track, promised back in 2002, has stalled indefinitely in the face of low ridership, deficits, inadequate funding, and pilfered tax revenues.

Tri-Rail, the three-county commuter train that has been breaking national ridership records since 2006, is perhaps Miami's only rail success story. Yet the system still doesn't have a permanent funding source, so its fate continually hangs in the balance from one year to the next. And critics often call it "the train from nowhere to nowhere" because it lies too far west of major downtown and commercial centers to be accessible without a car, shuttle bus, or other form of mass transit.

Already there's talk within FDOT of scrapping the FEC commuter-train idea entirely. "Because of how much rail systems cost," says FDOT's Seeburger, "there are arguments for obtaining the FEC right-of-way, paving [the strip of land beside the tracks], and running buses on it. Not that that would be cheap, but it would be less expensive than putting in the additional tracks that are needed and all the communication systems required."

City buses running alongside the FEC tracks may not have the romantic appeal of commuter trains gliding along the rails, but opponents of rail-transit make a solid case. Wendell Cox, a former Los Angeles County transportation commissioner and vocal rail opponent, regularly churns out anti-rail literature and travels the world consulting on transportation issues. His message: Other than New York City and Chicago, no rail system in the U.S. has demonstrated the ability to reduce traffic congestion.

"Putting a commuter train on the FEC line," Cox says, "would not eliminate the necessity of expanding I-95, the turnpike, and other urban roads. The test of rail's success is not the number of people on the train, but the number of cars removed from the road. Something like 98 percent of transit in the Miami area is by car. You're not going to change that. The problem is the last

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quarter mile. International studies show that anyone who has the money to own a car is not going to walk more than a quarter mile to and from a transit station.”

The idea that rail transit is an impotent white elephant may be difficult to accept, especially for some Biscayne Corridor residents who dream of commuting by train to jobs in downtown Miami. Bob Powers, president of the Palm Grove Neighborhood Association in Miami's Upper Eastside, couldn't find enough epithets to describe how he feels about rail detractors and the FEC project: “I went to so many FDOT project meetings it would make your head spin. When someone tells me they need to do a five-year study, I say, What do you need to study? The FEC made their money bringing tourists to Miami! How much money did they just spend making express toll lanes on I-95? Why didn't they put that money into the FEC? In 1961 JFK said he wanted to put a man on the moon. It took us eight years to do it and he was dead for six of them! So please don't tell me we can't make this work.”

Making FEC commuter trains work would *seem* to be a fool-proof undertaking. Roughly 60 stations proposed by FDOT (see map), placed along the corridor's commercial and residential areas, should theoretically make pedestrian access practical, leading not only to a successful rail system but also to a reduction in north-south automobile traffic. But whether there's enough population density within walking distance of those proposed stations is questionable.

When the *BT* recently hiked the tracks from the Miami port bridge to Miami Shores, it appeared that many of the sites were almost entirely devoid of pedestrians. Notably, though, several new high-rise condos were situated along the line, indicating that developers may have been aware of FDOT's commuter-rail plans. Most of the buildings were empty, however, a consequence of Miami's spectacular real-estate bust. And until the housing market rebounds and density significantly increases, any commuter-train operation on the FEC line will almost certainly be a park-and-ride system.

That scenario has some locals worried. At a 2006 FDOT public hearing, residents who live along the FEC line expressed concern that people arriving from surrounding areas to use the system would cause unwanted commotion, traffic congestion, and overdevelopment of station areas. Also on their list of potential drawbacks: noise and fumes from trains, continual horn blasts, disrupted traffic patterns at track crossings, and expropriation of land for stations, parking lots, and other facilities. FDOT has since addressed two of those concerns, recommending the implementation of “quiet zones” and clean-fuel technology, but the other issues have yet to be discussed in detail.

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Naysayers and concerned property owners aside, Miami-Dade's congested roadways are crying out for a viable transportation solution. Unstable gas prices, global warming, and a desire for "smart growth" have further increased interest in urban rail.

Seth Bramson, a Miami Shores resident and the FEC's company historian, says, "The steel wheel and the steel rail are the most efficient and economical way of moving people and goods that exist. A single train can carry the load of 280 [tractor-trailer] trucks. One gallon of fuel will move one ton of freight 423 miles." He goes on to stress the critical role the FEC currently plays in Florida: "The most important part of what the FEC does is to serve as a conveyor belt on rails. If the FEC was not there to move the thousands of carloads of freight each day, I-95 and U.S. 1 would operate at rush hour conditions 24 hours a day, seven days a week. That's how important the FEC is. So any commuter operation in the corridor would have to be *complimentary* to the freight operation."

In fact, concern about the FEC's freight operation was the very thing that led to the FDOT study. As Scott Seeburger explains, "Miami-Dade had been looking at the corridor for a long time. Tri-Rail was looking at it north of West Palm Beach. And there had been one or two studies earlier in Broward. The FEC felt that the whole thing was being done kind of hodge-podge. They were concerned that different governmental entities would be coming at them with proposals and they didn't want to jeopardize their well-run and profitable freight services, so they requested a study. They're involved in the process and their needs are taken into consideration."

There's little doubt, however, that commuter trains on the FEC tracks will mean millions of dollars in new revenue for the company as local governments would need to lease or buy the right to use the corridor. In addition, some of the company's 2500 acres of real estate would increase in value as trackside parcels would be required for stations and double-tracking. FEC property values would also rise as business interests sought to establish themselves along the new commuter route, a fact that likely did not escape the multinational Fortress Investment Group.

In May 2007, the New York-based firm shelled out \$3.5 billion to acquire Florida East Coast Industries and its real-estate arm, Flagler Development. Earlier the same year, Fortress purchased RailAmerica, an operator of 41 short-line railroads across North America. According to Seth Bramson, the FEC is slated to become the flagship railroad of RailAmerica and will soon begin operating under the name "FEC RailAmerica," with headquarters in Jacksonville.

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Fortress Investment Group may or may not have purchased the FEC specifically because they foresaw a boom in passenger service along the corridor, but FDOT's Scott Seeburger says that shortly after his study began, he started receiving calls from people he assumed were brokers looking for investments. Fortress, it appears, suspected that passenger trains could be in the railway's future.

Amtrak is also interested in the FEC line, according to the Florida *Times-Union*. The federally supported national passenger carrier would like to move its twice-daily Miami-to-Jacksonville service from the Tri-Rail tracks to the FEC, where travel time would be shorter and trains could make stops in key coastal cities along the way. In 2001 Amtrak signed an operating agreement with the FEC for a similar route, but the plan collapsed amid concerns about Amtrak's finances. A \$15 billion funding bill, approved by Congress this past June, could put Amtrak in a position to pursue the plan once again.

Seeburger believes that eventually there will be *some kind* of commuter service along the FEC corridor. "How long it takes," he says, "is the real question, because of the amount of money that's involved. Where are the funds going to come from? And there will have to be a local contribution." Financing will likely need to come from all available sources: federal, state, and the three counties involved. Whether residents would approve of a tax increase to support a commuter train remains to be seen.

Given Florida's current \$2.3 billion budget deficit, and Miami-Dade County's history of failed public-transit projects, an FEC commuter train may remain an elusive dream. But President-elect Barack Obama's massive infrastructure-funding plan might help. Already Miami Mayor Manny Diaz has asked Obama for \$3.4 billion for public-works projects within the city, some of which would go to rail development.

The golden age of railroading may be long gone, but the possibility of easy, affordable rail travel continues to hold enormous appeal for many thousands of urbanites, especially those marooned daily on Miami's clogged asphalt arteries, slumped behind steering wheels in resignation. And until a viable transportation alternative surfaces, that's where they'll remain -- in their metal boxes, staring at the railway tracks, waiting for the train.

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