

Still Waiting for the Train

Written by Terence Cantarella
March 2009

Biscayne Corridor residents to FDOT: Yes! And please hurry!



South Florida, like many densely populated metro regions around the nation, is planning to expand commuter-rail transit in an effort to curb traffic congestion, create jobs, lower emissions, and reduce fuel dependence. The only problem, say many Biscayne Corridor residents, is that it's not happening fast enough.

Some 50 people showed up at the Miami Shores Country Club on the evening February 12 for the Florida Department of Transportation's "Phase 2 Kick-off Meeting" of their South Florida East Coast Corridor study. The study, launched in 2005, has been examining the possibility of adding passenger trains to the Florida East Coast Railway.

The railway (known as the FEC) runs along the coast from Miami to Jacksonville, and then connects to other railroads that head north up the Eastern Seaboard. But the southernmost 85-mile stretch, which roughly parallels U.S. 1 from downtown Miami (Biscayne Boulevard) to West Palm Beach, passes through the centers of 28 South Florida cities, making it an obvious candidate for commuter-rail services and the focus of FDOT's study.

Built by oil and hotel magnate Henry Flagler in the late 19th Century, the FEC played a major role in Florida's development, bringing goods and people to the once inaccessible southern end of the peninsula. But competition from cars, affordable air travel, and problems posed by a workers' strike brought passenger service to an abrupt end in 1968, and the railroad has carried nothing but freight ever since. Reinstating passenger service today, says FDOT, would not only ease north-south traffic congestion on I-95 and U.S. 1, but also improve the quality of life along the corridor.

The gathering in Miami Shores, one of 11 meetings in the tri-county area over the past five weeks, was part of an effort by FDOT to involve the public as they move toward deciding things like transit technologies, routes, station locations, and possible connections to Tri-Rail in the west. Attendees had an opportunity to examine project illustrations, mingle with project reps, and ask questions following a half-hour presentation.

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Sue Gibbons of Gannett Fleming, the consulting firm working on the rail study, began the evening with these prophetic words: "If you think congestion is bad today, there's an enormous amount of growth that's going to take place between now and 2030, and it's only going to get worse."

Within the 100-foot-wide FEC corridor, she explained, there's room for up to five tracks, so a combination of local, express, and even inter-city Amtrak trains is possible. But she cautioned, "In the very best of circumstances, it's going to be six years or more before we actually have service running anywhere on this corridor -- and probably many more years than that before the whole plan is implemented."

That timeline frustrated Miami Shores resident John Van Leer, who stood up and stated, "I'd really like to ride on this system before I die."

Scott Seeburger, project manager at FDOT, noted that securing funding for the project is a major cause of the delay: "The hang-up is that we're trying to capture federal money, which eats up a lot of time." The federal government will fund up to 50 percent of the project, he said, and FDOT's protracted studies are necessary in order to comply with complicated federal regulations. With an estimated project cost of \$4 to \$10 billion, federal money will be essential.

A North Miami resident named Mike suggested, "The length of time you're spending to get federal money is kind of rankling. Is there anything we can do to push this?"

"Talk to your local officials," Seeburger said. "If the local community really wants it, there's going to have to be a sharing of the cost." In other parts of the country where rail systems are in place, he said, citizens have been willing to pay for it. So a dedicated source of local funding will need to be secured.

Mention of local funding rubbed some raw nerves in the room. Miami-Dade implemented a half-cent sales tax back in 2002 to fund *new* transportation projects, but nearly half of the \$800 million collected so far has been squandered, and the new projects never materialized. "I don't think you realize how badly burned people are," said one Upper Eastside resident. "We paid

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money and expected things, and through corruption we lost everything.”

The biggest question of the night, though, was whether the FEC project would receive any money from Florida’s \$12.2 billion share of President Barack Obama’s economic stimulus plan. “The short answer,” Seeburger said, “is no. We won’t have anything ready to go to construction within the time frame that the stimulus demands.”

On a positive note, Seeburger mentioned that he has worked on several large transportation projects and has never seen the level of support that exists for the FEC project.

Approximately 96 proposed station locations are currently on the table for the tri-county region, and so far only the Village of Miami Shores has expressed no interest. “They don’t want a station,” said Ric Katz, an FDOT consultant. “They don’t want noise from horns or any more commotion in their city than they already have, and I think we can accommodate that.”

The effects of commuter trains on minority and historic neighborhoods, as well as on parks, trails, and wetlands along the corridor will also be taken into consideration in this new, second phase of FDOT’s study. “We’re going to rock and roll to get through Phase 2,” Seeburger enthused. “We should have a decision [about the project’s viability] by spring of next year.”

Bob Powers, president of the Upper Eastside’s Palm Grove Neighborhood Association, questioned why there were no representatives from the FEC at the meeting. “I’m furious that you can even say to me that it’s going to be another six years.... You could put trains on there tomorrow and people would use them. The next time you do this, I’d really like to see a rep from the FEC here to say whether they’re onboard or not.”

Seeburger responded, “If there’s something that makes a lot of sense and it’s not happening, it’s not because there’s a conspiracy, it isn’t because people aren’t doing their jobs. The fight over money is constant, even in boom times.”

Overall residents displayed a mix of impatience and enthusiasm for the project. The *BT*’s January cover story, which took an in-depth look at the FEC railroad and the FDOT study, bore

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the title “Waiting for the Train.” The gathering in Miami Shores clearly showed that Biscayne Corridor residents are not only waiting, they’re eager to climb aboard.

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