

A Hundred Trains a Day

Written by Erik Bojnansky, BT Senior Writer
June 2018

Welcome to the future of FEC rail traffic



After years of anticipation, the Brightline train is finally whisking passengers from downtown Miami to the downtown areas of Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach, at speeds up to 80 miles per hour.

However, an expanded quiet zone along the Florida East Coast Railroad tracks -- long promised to Biscayne Corridor dwellers that would ban train horns, except in emergencies -- has yet to be implemented. That's because all of the federally mandated safety features required for such a quiet zone are still being installed at street crossings along the tracks.

Those "supplemental" safety enhancements will be added during the summer, according to Brightline spokeswoman Ali Soule.

"All improvements needed for Brightline's service are in place," Soule explains. "The installation of the supplemental safety measures required for the quiet zone will occur during the summer. After the construction is completed, Miami-Dade County can file for the Notice of Establishment (NOE) for a quiet zone."

The NOE application process, which ultimately must be approved by the Federal Railroad Administration, takes 21 days, she adds.

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That isn't welcome news for Darin Held, an interior designer and architect who lives near El Portal Village Hall, just yards away from the Florida East Coast train tracks. Held says that when he moved to El Portal back in 2014, he had no idea "there would be a 24-hour train schedule."

"It's very disruptive," Held says, adding that county and Florida Department of Transportation officials should have enacted quiet zones "before allowing a private operator to come in and bring a train system here."

Held isn't alone. Barbara Fuechsl, an El Portal activist who sought the creation of quiet zones for years, says she's also receiving complaints about train horns. "The majority of the people I know are all bothered by this," she says.

The Federal Railroad Administration requires that trains nationwide must sound their horn four times (two long, one short, and one long) when they're approaching a street crossing. The horn must also have a volume of between 96 and 110 decibels. Of course, that rule applies to the FEC railroad tracks, which dissect residential areas in Miami, Miami Shores, El Portal, Biscayne Park, North Miami, North Miami Beach, and Ojus.



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Currently, trains travel these tracks about 24 times each day. The Florida East Coast Railway, the tracks' owner, runs at least 16 freight trains daily, sometimes in the dead of night. Brightline, which leases the tracks from the FEC Railway, has been running eight trains a day, between 6:00 a.m. and 11:00 p.m., since the opening of its MiamiCentral station May 19.

Train traffic along the FEC tracks is expected to get busier. Patrick Goddard, president and COO of Brightline, says his company might "ramp up" to 11 roundtrips a day in a few weeks. And officials from Miami-Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach counties are negotiating with Brightline and its parent company, Florida East Coast Industries (FEI), on the creation of a commuter rail line with 20 stops between Miami and Jupiter.

Eventually, the FEC tracks may accommodate up to 100 train trips a day, according to a 2016 Florida Department of Transportation report (see "Third Rail," January 2018). That's a lot of train-horn blasts unless a "quiet zone" can be established.

Quiet zones already exist along parts of the CSX tracks west of I-95 in Miami-Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach, where Tri-Rail operates. But before quiet zones along the FEC tracks in the Biscayne Corridor can be realized, safety improvements must be made at street crossings. All three South Florida counties have been laboring to create the improvements needed to qualify for quiet zones. Miami-Dade County, for example, is using \$1.5 million in federal grants to execute safety measures, such as new medians and new railroad signals. The county is even buying and installing 50 "milepost placard signs to indicate to railroad personnel the presence of a quiet zone," says Elizabeth Rockwell, spokeswoman for the Miami-Dade Transportation Planning Organization.

FEI, meanwhile, has claimed to have invested around \$60 million on safety measures for cross streets between Miami and West Palm Beach.

However, a key enhancement needed for the creation of an extended FEC quiet zone has yet to be installed at railroad crossings: four-quadrant gates. While typical gates have two arms, four-quadrant gates have four arms that completely cover the roadway.

These needed measures are not mere bureaucratic concerns. Between July 2017 and April 2018, eight people have been hit by Brightline trains during regular trips or test runs. Six of the

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victims died, five of those in Palm Beach County. Two of the victims, both from Boynton Beach, were killed less than a week apart in January as they tried to cross the tracks.

Brightline has since launched an awareness campaign about the dangers of crossing the tracks as trains approach. The company has also contracted with an outside firm to staff some cross streets with flag-waving “ambassadors” wearing orange vests. Brightline has also enlisted the aid of various police departments, including Miami’s and Aventura’s, to enforce the law along the tracks, Soule says.



Goddard says the ambassadors will be deployed at various intersections for at least the next several weeks. “If we feel like it’s useful and effective to have people out there, we’ll continue to do so,” he says. “We’ve made a major commitment to safety. It’s a significant part of our culture and who we are and our commitment to the communities in which we’re operating.”

Murray Saltz, a purchasing director who lives just west of Aventura in River Parc Estates, says he’s seen the increased police presence and the ambassadors. Saltz has also noticed plenty of trains zipping along the tracks in recent months. “You used to get five or six freight trains during the day,” he says. “Now you’re getting that Brightline train every 25 or 30 minutes.” (Goddard explains that most of the trains are scheduled during “peak travel times,” but that schedules can change according to consumer demand.)

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Saltz complains that the trains make the already congested vehicular traffic in northeast Miami-Dade even worse. Those traffic tie-ups are in line with FDOT engineers' predictions, which is why the state agency has proposed building a \$25 million flyover and looping road system adjacent to Ives Dairy Road. Construction on that project, which requires the purchase of private property and the demolition of 26 businesses, is slated to start in February 2021.

Saltz has his own idea for improving traffic: yank out the FEC train tracks and force the freight and passenger trains to use tracks further west. As it stands now, Saltz says, the trains have hindered his drives to Aventura even for groceries. "Show one benefit the train has to the Aventura area," he challenges.

Actually, county officials plan to create a train station just west of Aventura within a ten-block area of Ojus near NE 193rd Street. To enable that station's creation, county planners have recommended that the ten-block area's zoning continue to be determined by the Miami-Dade County Commission in the event that the unincorporated area becomes a municipality. (See "To Be or Not to Be," this issue.)

Although Saltz hates the trains, the creation of a commuter line along the FEC tracks has been embraced by county officials and many Biscayne Corridor residents as a viable alternative to navigating congested roads with personal vehicles. As a first step toward that goal, a Tri-Rail station is now under construction at FECL's three million-square-foot MiamiCentral project, where Brightline currently operates. (Most of MiamiCentral, which includes 800 apartments and 180,000 square feet of retail, is still under construction.)

"Initial discussions" are also occurring between local officials and Brightline, Soule says. "Brightline recognizes the importance of connecting Tri-Rail to MiamiCentral and potentially allowing additional commuter stations on the FEC Railway corridor," she states in an e-mail to the *BT*.

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