

Commuter rail line to downtown gathers steam

BY CATHERINE LACKNER

If a Florida Department of Transportation project wins okay and funding, downtown Miami might have direct commuter rail by 2017.

The state department, engineering the SunRail commuter rail project in Central Florida, plans next month to seek a federal grant for a planned mass-transit program, an Obama administration priority.

Trains, if chosen, would run from Jupiter to Miami on Florida East Coast Railway tracks.

In June, department officials met with Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties' metropolitan planning organizations to discuss options, said Sharon Cino, department district spokesperson in Fort Lauderdale.

"We presented them with a shortlist of four options, two bus and two rail," she said. "We're getting feedback from them now, and public hearings will be held in September in all three counties. We're getting ready to walk away with a consensus as to the preferred alternative."

If commuter rail were chosen, environ-

mental studies would take several years. Then the department would start engineering and design, work on rights-of-way and finally construction along this 85-mile-stretch of Florida East Coast Railway (FEC) track that now handles only freight.

Now, Tri-Rail commuter trains run daily from Miami to West Palm Beach on CSX tracks. Riders get off at Northwest 79th Street and must then ride Metrorail to get downtown. The new project would offer a straight shot into the central business district on tracks that parallel I-95.

The project is eligible for New Starts funding for any "fixed guideway system which utilizes and occupies a separate right-of-way, or rail line, for the exclusive use of mass transportation and other high occupancy vehicles," according to a federal Web site.

Directors of Miami's Downtown Development Authority last week voted to support the efforts, which came to light during a June discussion of a related project.

The Port of Miami, City of Miami, state transportation department, FEC and Flagler development united to win authority support in May to seek a grant from the Na-

tional Infrastructure Investment program to renovate decades-old tracks to the port. They're the southern terminus of the line that might carry commuter trains.

Authority board members strongly lobbied for the railway to allow passenger trains.

To prepare for the possibility of passengers, FEC is "reaching the corridor for both" freight and passenger trains, said Husein A. Cumber, a Washington consultant working with the FEC, whose "long-term vision is exactly the same as that of the DDA."

The tracks run down the center of a 100-foot right-of-way. FEC plans to move the rebuilt freight tracks to one side of the corridor to leave room for another set that could carry passenger trains, Mr. Cumber said.

If approved, the commuter project "should go to the front of the line," given the need for commuter rail in the area, said David Arganbright, FEC's vice president for governmental affairs. "But it's important to note that FEC is not part of the study. Those are just our tracks. We're not in the driver's seat."