

Despite obstacles, Tri-Rail still coming to downtown Miami in 2018

- Tri-Rail plans to begin service to downtown Miami in 2018
- A setback in the Legislature had almost sabotaged the downtown station
- Tri-Rail will take out a loan to make sure the downtown station is still built

BY MICHAEL VASQUEZ



Even without the state's help, Tri-Rail officials have found a way to finally bring the commuter trains directly to downtown Miami.

Thanks to some last-minute legal maneuvering — and Tri-Rail's decision on Friday to borrow money to close a \$20 million funding gap — plans for a downtown Miami station are now once again chugging along.

"The project's too important for the region, certainly to Miami-Dade, certainly to the city of

Miami," said Jack Stephens, executive director of the South Florida Regional Transportation Authority (SFRTA), which runs Tri-Rail. "So it had to happen, but we had to figure out a way to make it happen."

By the end of 2018, Tri-Rail's downtown Miami station should be operating — ferrying commuters from north Miami-Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach counties. Tri-Rail passengers who want to get to downtown currently have to transfer to Miami-Dade's Metrorail line in Hialeah, an inconvenience that makes it harder to convince commuters to abandon their cars.

Tri-Rail's new downtown location will be part of the MiamiCentral station currently being constructed by All Aboard, a planned express train service that will connect Miami to Orlando. The ability of Tri-Rail to piggyback on a station already being built was a rare and valuable opportunity, given the high cost of buying downtown real estate.

Local governments such as Miami-Dade County and the city of Miami were big believers in the new Tri-Rail station, and joined with other entities such as the Downtown Development Authority to

contribute about \$45 million to make the station happen.

But Florida's Legislature nearly wrecked Tri-Rail's downtown Miami plans when lawmakers this session failed to pass an amendment that would have clarified the legal liability if a crash ever occurred on the Florida East Coast railway tracks that will be used by Tri-Rail and All Aboard.

Because the tracks will serve both public and private passenger cars, both Tri-Rail and All Aboard wanted lawmakers to pass a law making it clear they would not be held responsible for a crash in which they had no involvement. When lawmakers failed to act, that also created a funding problem, because the Florida Department of Transportation wouldn't kick in its planned Tri-Rail contribution of roughly \$20 million unless the law had been changed.

In effect, a minor legal technicality was threatening to sabotage a hugely important piece of South Florida's future transportation plans. But Tri-Rail was able to solve the problem in the following way:

- Tri-Rail will set up its own self-insurance fund, which will solve the crash liability issue. It's not a perfect solution, as Tri-Rail will have to set aside a dedicated reserve of \$5 million, and pay annual premiums expected to be around \$1 million. The SFRTA will continue pushing for a state law change in future years in hopes of eventually eliminating that expense.
- Tri-Rail will borrow roughly \$20 million to replace the missing FDOT contribution. Tri-Rail currently receives millions in funding from local governments, and a portion of that money will go toward repaying the \$20 million loan.

In a Friday vote, Tri-Rail's 10-member board — a mixture of local elected officials and members appointed by the governor — unanimously signed off on the new plan to get the downtown Miami station built.

Board member Andrew Frey, a Gov. Rick Scott appointee, called it "very confusing" that the state isn't going to be involved.

"I think there's stronger words than confusing, but I won't use 'em," Frey said. "I want this done, and that's it."

After the downtown station is up and running, Tri-Rail has long-term plans to continue adding stations going north along the FEC corridor near U.S. 1 — traveling through the Design District, Aventura, downtown Hollywood, and ultimately all the way up to Jupiter in Palm Beach County.