

Blueprints released for new Coastal Link commuter line



The Brightline station in Fort Lauderdale would be among six stops for the proposed Coastal Link. Susan Stocker/south florida Sun Sentinel

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By David Lyons South Florida Sun Sentinel

A long-awaited blueprint for a commuter rail service on the east side of Broward County has emerged for public view, with potential stops including five cities and Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport.

Dubbed the Coastal Link, the idea is to hitch a Broward segment along the Florida East Coast Railway line with a proposed leg between Aventura and downtown Miami that's been endorsed by Miami-Dade County officials.

According to a plan outlined by the Florida Department of Transportation, the Broward stops would include Deerfield Beach, Pompano Beach and Fort Lauderdale — site of Brightline's current station — as well as Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport and the city of Hollywood.

Now, the FDOT is prepared to unveil the plan through virtual and in-person meetings scheduled for Aug. 30 through Sept. 1. The department has sent meeting notices to local public officials and property owners and tenants whose stores and homes are within 300 feet of the FEC tracks.

Besides the agency, the effort includes Brightline, whose high-speed regional rail service is expected to restart between West Palm Beach and Miami in November. Brightline holds exclusive rights to passenger rail service on the FEC line. Since last year, the county has been in talks about a potential operating agreement with the passenger railroad for the use of the corridor.

Gregory Stuart, executive director of the Broward Metropolitan Planning Organization, said there will no final decisions made about the proposed system until early next year. The county commission, he said, “has to say this is the project we want to support.”

Nonetheless, the naming of the station locations has energized officials of the chosen cities.

They see a commuter line as a means for unlocking traffic congestion on local streets and highways and stimulating economic development, affordable housing and neighborhood improvements.

“I think people are pretty excited about for the possibilities it opens up,” said Rex Hardin, the mayor of Pompano Beach. “This has been part of the planning for Pompano Beach for decades. I’ve heard no opposition to it. I don’t know why there would be. This would open up transportation for the folks who live nearby. It would also open up transportation options for the western people also.”

New River still a sticking point

Nonetheless, a seemingly intractable barrier to the plan is how to find a way for more trains to cross the New River in downtown Fort Lauderdale, which is home to a multibillion-dollar marine industry that counts the

waterway as a major artery for its business.

Whenever the existing drawbridge is lowered to allow the Florida East Coast and Brightline trains to pass, marine traffic is halted.

The rail line’s critics and marine industry advocates fear there will be more delays if a new commuter rail operation starts up — a development that would clog river traffic even more.

Late Friday, Broward Mayor Steve Geller cautioned that no progress had been made in the access rights talks with Brightline because no solution has been reached about the river crossing.

“At some point in time there will have to be a way of getting over, under, through or around the New River,” he said. “We have to figure out and resolve that issue.”

He suggested it would be possible to start service to the south of the river before the crossing issue is solved, but “a lot of this depends on what’s happening in Dade.” Although Miami-Dade is ahead of Broward in the planning process, it’s not complete. And Geller said he couldn’t see a commuter service running only between Aventura and the airport.

Brightline offered no comment.

The prospect of a commuter service continues to concern Fort Lauderdale Mayor Dean Trantalis, who fears a city divided.

“Now it’s a question of trying to build an infrastructure that would allow the commuter railroad to run efficiently without interfering with the east-west pathways that have

developed over time,” he said.

Trantalis prefers a tunnel. Others prefer a new bridge that is high enough not to block marine traffic.

Then there’s the cost. A study has shown that a tunnel could be built for up to \$3 billion, though Trantalis, after speaking with entrepreneur Elon Musk’s The Boring Co., believes the cost would be well below \$1 billion.

A public discussion about the river crossing will come sometime this fall, a government official said.

Hollywood Mayor Josh Levy said his city has been speaking with the county to see if the airport and Hollywood stations could be constructed “before the bridge starts so we can connect South Broward and Fort Lauderdale airport to Miami.”

Each of the locations, according to planning documents, was picked for their ability to help their areas to generate new jobs, affordable housing and mixed land uses that would support new development. The cities were also assessed for their ability to expand local mobility and ties to other forms of transportation.

Under the criteria laid out by the FDOT, spacing between stations was also important. The state was looking for distances no less than 2.5 miles and no more than 5 miles between stops.

From north to south, here is a look at where Broward commuter passengers could step on and off the trains.

Deerfield Beach

The site is situated at Hillsboro Boulevard, a major east-west thoroughfare, and SW 2nd Street.

Interstate 95 lies to the west and U.S. 1 to the east, giving drivers easy access to the station.

The city is home to JM Family Enterprises, the car retailer; SHL Pharma, maker of drug delivery devices; a Sylvester Cancer Center; and a long ocean pier and beach that attracts vacationers from around South Florida, the state and elsewhere.

The city is literally the next available stop south of Boca Raton, which is the scene of a construction project for a Brightline station on its regional South Florida to Orlando system.

Mayor Bill Ganz did not respond to an email message seeking comment.

Pompano Beach

Although the listed location is Hammondville Road and NE 6th Street, Mayor Hardin says it is a “placeholder.” He expects the station could be elsewhere such as where City Hall sits now, just south of the rail crossing at Atlantic Boulevard. The city has discussed building a new one.

Pompano has undergone a dramatic transformation in recent years, with new multifamily housing, a revived enclave of restaurants along Atlantic and a major overhaul of its beach and pier neighborhood east of the Intracoastal Waterway. In addition, luxury high-rise

residents are going up along the beach. To the west of I-95, the Isle Casino racing Pompano Park is undergoing a major redevelopment.

“We’re excited about the development opportunities it has for us,” Hardin said of the project. “I’m just excited for the entire corridor. This has been dreamed about for a long time. This is going to free up so many road trips. It’s good for the environment, the roads and people’s sanity.”

A key portion of the project is a proposed east-west crossover from the Tri-Rail commuter line, which runs north and south to the west of I-95.

“That’s why Pompano Beach was always envisioned as one of the good spots for a station,” Hardin said.

Oakland Park

The city has been interested in a commuter rail stop since 2010, when its council passed a resolution supporting it. More recently, a citywide survey found 77% of its residents expressed backing for a station.

But Oakland Park was in a competition for a slot with its southern neighbor, Wilton Manors, said City Manager David Hebert.

“Did it come down to a question of the two cities?” Hebert asked. “Yes.”

He said Wilton Manors was a little too close to Fort Lauderdale and too far from Pompano Beach to meet the distance requirements.

Oakland Park also has a significant economic redevelopment program under way that fits the selection criteria.

Earlier this month, the city issued a call to developers to compete for a redevelopment project involving 6 acres on Dixie Highway, between NE 36th Street and NE 38th Street. The site includes City Hall, which will move to the Sky Building on the west side of Dixie as part of a public-private partnership. The idea is to build residential and commercial space, the train stop, green space and public parking.

Hebert said it helped that Oakland Park owns the land for a station, while Wilton Manors doesn’t.

Fort Lauderdale

A station already exists downtown — just north of Broward Boulevard and west of Andrews Avenue — to serve Brightline’s regional ambitions.

But Mayor Trantalis wants to ensure the additional traffic created by a commuter line doesn’t generate daylong traffic obstructions along the city’s east-west roadways and waterways.

“How do we prevent this new system from interfering with the existing traffic patterns established over the years?” he asked in a recent interview.

“Any bridge would completely sever the city completely in half,” he said. “We’re trying to create a connectivity between neighborhoods.”

That's why he thinks a tunnel is a better option than a bridge. "Of course it would cost more money, but it's an investment in our future," he said.

Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport

From the early days of Brightline's operations, the airport has been included in public conversations about new stations. FDOT planners apparently see its proximity to major roads as a major advantage.

Mark Gale, CEO and director of aviation for the Broward County Aviation Department, could not be reached for comment.

But observers point out that the FEC line slides right past the east side of the airport, which is surrounded by roadways including U.S. 1, Interstate 595, I-95 and Griffin Road. It would also be a short bus or cab ride between a station and Port Everglades and its cruise line operations.

Hollywood

Mayor Levy appears to have had Hollywood positioned for a station before most of the other candidates.

"We've been in touch for years in the collective endeavor to make the coastal link come to life and here we are," he said.

The location of the city's proposed station is between Taylor and Tyler streets in downtown.

"We're lucky we have this railroad at the main artery of South Florida," he said. There is already \$1 billion in new or under-construction development projects in the downtown area.

"Certainly the addition of commuter rail can only serve to improve and further enhance the lifestyle people can have in living in a secondary urban core," Levy said. "We're not trying to become downtown Fort Lauderdale. We have our own flavor — more laid back, more quaint."

Plus, the station site is not far from Dania Beach and Hallandale Beach, the city's neighbors to the north and south.

Who will operate the system?

Tri-Rail says it's the obvious candidate to run the Coastal Link system, given its four decades of experience operating commuter trains along the CSX line from Mangonia Park in Palm Beach County to Miami International Airport.

"We're obviously very interested parties," Steven L. Adams, executive director of the South Florida Regional Transportation Authority, which operates Tri-Rail.

"The transaction has to be negotiated between the county and Brightline. At that point when they complete the deal, then the county gets to select the operator."