



Orlando Sentinel

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Commuter-rail line on tap for '09

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August 3, 2006

Gov. Jeb Bush rode a sleek train car into Orlando on Wednesday to announce a deal that will put Central Florida commuters on a railway by 2009.

The rail car is the same kind that could whisk 200 passengers at a time through Volusia, Seminole, Orange and Osceola counties at 45 mph.

After stepping off the double-decker car, Bush announced details of a \$491 million deal between the state and CSX Transportation that includes the purchase of 61 miles of tracks from the freight company for the long-awaited commuter trains.

The deal is a major victory for proponents of mass transit but also will be a relief for frustrated motorists stuck in rush-hour traffic jams caused by slow-moving freight trains in downtown Orlando, Winter Park and other places.

The rail plan calls for prohibiting freight trains on the commuter line from 5 a.m. to 10 a.m. and from 3 p.m. to 10 p.m.

CSX will get exclusive use of the tracks for freight from midnight to 5 a.m. Both passenger cars and freight cars will be allowed during the other seven hours.

That schedule will start when the first railway leg, from DeBary to Orlando, opens in late 2009. The second phase, from Orlando to Poinciana, is expected for late 2013.

"This is a win-win-win for citizens of Central Florida, for businesses of Central Florida and, of course, for the people that serve both of them in public life," Bush said.

In addition to \$150 million for purchasing the tracks for commuter rail, the deal also includes more than \$300 million for improving tracks for CSX around the state.

That will allow the company to reroute trains from the Orlando area and expand its operations by transporting more freight to meet the needs of a growing state.

"Every rail car we put on the tracks can potentially take three trucks off the road," Bush said.

Bush assured truckers they are unlikely to lose business, saying it will take both trucks and rail to keep Florida supplied.

Historic day

U.S. Rep. John Mica, R-Winter Park, who has pushed for commuter rail for more than a decade, called



the agreement "historic."

It has taken decades for Central Florida's politicians to agree that a rail system is needed and pledge money to build it.

In addition to the \$491 million for the tracks, construction of the system, including at least 16 stops, will amount to about \$475 million. The federal government will chip in half, the state will provide 25 percent, and local county and city governments will put up the other 25 percent. The state also will pay operating costs through 2015.

"This is the most significant transportation initiative since it was decided to run the interstate through Central Florida," Mica said.

Both he and U.S. Rep. Corrine Brown, D-Jacksonville, serve on the House's Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure.

Brown called the commuter-rail system a relief from the crowded interstate.

"Every day it takes commuters longer and longer to travel to and from work, and in my estimation, adding more highway lanes is not the answer to this problem."

The Florida Department of Transportation, which will oversee construction and the first years of operation, said that the commuter line should relieve as much congestion as would adding another lane to Interstate 4.

The final deal for the rail system may not be signed and sealed for 18 to 24 months because the state must secure federal funding and CSX and the state must hash out liability for any environmental contamination near the tracks.

In addition, CSX must secure approvals for a new, larger operations center in Winter Haven to take the place of the current Taft yard.

But officials believe those hurdles can be overcome.

"The plan announced today is good for commuters, good for freight customers and compatible with the long-term goals of CSX Transportation," said Michael Ward, chairman and chief executive officer of CSX Corp.

Eventually, the region will have to figure out who will oversee and maintain the system for the long term.

Response across region

Supporters of commuter rail say the new system will begin to relieve Central Florida's roadways, whose congestion has been ranked ninth-worst in the nation.

Pressure has been building to develop mass-transit options in a region whose population is expected to double to more than 7 million people by 2050.

Orange County Commissioner Homer Hartage said commuter rail "is going to be good for working families and will bring our transportation system into the 21st century."

In Deltona, Central Florida's second-largest city, Vice Mayor David Santiago said commuter rail is a step in the right direction.

But he cautioned that the north-south line may have limited appeal.



"The majority of the working population of Deltona commutes west, but I think people who work in Orlando will use it, and the people who work in Lake Mary or Altamonte Springs probably won't," Santiago said.

Initial studies predict about 9,000 people a day will ride the train, expected to cost from \$2.50 to \$5.50 per ride depending on the length of the trip.

But the ridership number is based on conservative federal formulas and local officials hope the numbers will be higher, said Roger Neiswender, Orlando's transportation director.

Kissimmee Vice Mayor Wendell McKinnon said many people may try commuter rail out of curiosity and then get hooked.

McKinnon, who also chairs MetroPlan Orlando, the transportation planning agency for Orange, Seminole and Osceola counties, put it like this:

"It's just like going to an ice cream shop and you see a new flavor and you try it and you like it and then you will buy it again."

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s o d o

South Of Downtown Orlando

Central Florida rail-transit system

KEY: ■ Planned, no date ■ First leg, to be completed 2009 ■ ■ Second leg, to be completed 2013 ● Stations ■ Station-stop times

Proposed stops along the planned commuter-rail route could draw transit-oriented development — a mix of compact condos and town homes, shops and businesses.

The train is supposed to speed commutes. Boarding at 6 a.m. at the DeBary stop gets you to downtown Orlando in 47 minutes; to Poindana in 84 minutes.

For comparison, a *Sentinel* reporter recently drove the same route from DeBary to downtown leaving at 6 a.m. It took 26 minutes. To Poindana, via South Orange Blossom Trail, 72 minutes.

But as many Central Floridians know, the commute on I-4 isn't always so easy. Leaving at 8:32 a.m., the same drive took 38 minutes to downtown and 87 minutes to Poindana. That's 3 minutes slower than the commuter rail.

— Eitan Horowitz

DeLAND/AMTRAK STATION
On Old New York Avenue. No development plans now because segment from DeBary to DeLand is not yet scheduled.

DeBARY/PROGRESS ENERGY LOT
Off Highbanks Road in residential neighborhood. Plans to extend Saxon Boulevard in time for line's opening in 2009. More than 600 acres of vacant land. Talks about a 'transit village' to include housing, retail and office.

SANFORD/STATE ROAD 46
Several miles from downtown. Many tracts of land for sale. Some talks about mixed-use development to include homes, shops.

LAKE MARY/DOWNTOWN
At Old Lake Mary Road and Lake Mary Boulevard. Planning area calls for housing densities of about 18 homes per acre; condo buildings with 1st-floor shops and 2nd-floor residences. City plans upscale office buildings immediately next to station.

ALTAMONTE SPRINGS/STATE ROAD 436
S.R. 436 at Ronald Reagan Boulevard. Now a mix of impound lots, dilapidated houses and businesses. Plans allow transit development. Early development interest in building mix of residential and retail with shared parking and pedestrian walkways around station.

LONGWOOD/DOWNTOWN
Ronald Reagan Boulevard across from the city's historic district. Land-use plans already allow mixing commercial and residential. City will encourage restaurant next to station.

ORLANDO/FLORIDA HOSPITAL
Inside bustling Florida Hospital complex along Rollins Street. Surrounded by medical offices and many small, older commercial buildings. Possibilities for new retail, offices and some residential.

WINTER PARK/PARK AVENUE
Amtrak station beside Central Park. Posh restaurants and shops close by. New condos and retail planned near park.

ORLANDO/LYNX
Downtown at Garland Avenue and Livingston Street. Plans for an office complex and mix of hotel and condos nearby.

ORLANDO/CHURCH STREET STATION
Once thriving, currently many vacancies. Condo tower planned nearby.

ORLANDO/AMTRAK STATION
Long-standing station near center of Orlando Regional Medical Center complex. Large retail and residential development planned just south of station.

MEADOW WOODS
Large stretches of open area, near some newer developments, an undeveloped recreation area and Cypress Creek High School.

SAND LAKE ROAD
Mostly industrial yards and fast-food joints; few undeveloped parcels. Not a walkable area conducive to residential development. Planners envision bus connections to Orlando International Airport.

KISSIMMEE AMTRAK
Older station near downtown Kissimmee by many shops, restaurants. City wants transit center with Lynx buses, Greyhound, Amtrak and commuter rail. Mixed condo-retail planned nearby.

OSCEOLA PARKWAY
Fast-developing stretch of retail that includes Wal-Mart, just south of Orange County line. Could attract residential building.

POINCIANA INDUSTRIAL PARK
Mixed area of light industrial companies and some residential development. Nearby development is short-term rentals; could change to more-permanent residences.

SOURCES: Florida Department of Transportation/Central Florida Commuter Rail Transit Project, *Sentinel* research