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TODAY'S NEWS

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No crossing: Tri-Rail line into downtown may be on hold

BY CATHERINE LACKNER

Those who would benefit from direct Tri-Rail service into downtown Miami will have to wait a little longer, unless a deal can be struck with Florida East Coast Railway (FEC), which owns tracks that connect the downtowns of West Palm Beach, Boca Raton, Fort Lauderdale, Hollywood and Miami.

Now, Tri-Rail commuter trains run daily from Miami to West Palm Beach on tracks owned by CSX, which means riders must disembark at Northwest 79th Street in Miami-Dade and board Metrorail to get downtown.

A move afoot would switch Tri-Rail to FEC tracks a few blocks away for a straight shot into downtown Miami, to which the commuter line would be amenable, said Bonnie Arnold, Tri-Rail spokeswoman.

But the issue is complicated, directors of Miami's Downtown Development Authority learned this month.

"It's an enormous project to promote passenger rail,"



Photo by Maxine Usdan

Tri-Rail commuter trains currently run daily from Miami to West Palm Beach, but passengers must transfer to Metrorail to get downtown.

said Javier Betancourt, authority manager of urban transportation and planning. While the authority's master plan identifies better tri-county rail service and connectivity as a long-term priority, he said, "this would be an interim solution."

"It's extremely important to have this train system," said realty developer Alan Ojeda,

an authority director. "The Burle Marx project [for paving Biscayne Boulevard sidewalks, with uniform artistry] took 20 years. How can we speed this up? This needs to happen."

"There's very little interest in passenger rail" on FEC's part, said Marc Sarnoff, Miami City commissioner and authority chairman.

"Their priority is cargo," agreed Bruno Barreiro, Miami-Dade commissioner and an authority director. "There's also a huge liability issue. It's going to come down to the state acquiring that right-of-way. It's ideal; it hits every downtown from Palm Beach to Miami."

"I believe FEC is looking for the state to pay a tremendous amount to acquire that right-of-way," said attorney and authority director Neisen Kasdin, who first broached the Tri-Rail issue in October, "but that's not happening. The state doesn't have the money. This is going to have to be done in chunks, from the bottom up, not from the top down."

Mr. Barreiro suggested business interests in all three downtowns "get together to encourage development along the tracks; maybe that will get FEC to the table."

But Mr. Sarnoff was skeptical. "These guys are God," he said. "In fact, God reports to them."

Jacksonville-based FEC, founded by Henry Flagler in

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Neisen Kasdin

1895, operates 351 miles of track along Florida's east coast, over which move freight including automobiles, lumber, farm products, food, machinery, pulp and paper, building materials and petroleum products, according to the company's Web site.

RailAmerica, also based in Jacksonville, acquired FEC in March 2008. Principals of both companies are John E. Giles and David Rohal of Jacksonville, according to state business records. RailAmerica is privately held by funds managed by the Fortress Investment Group of New York City.