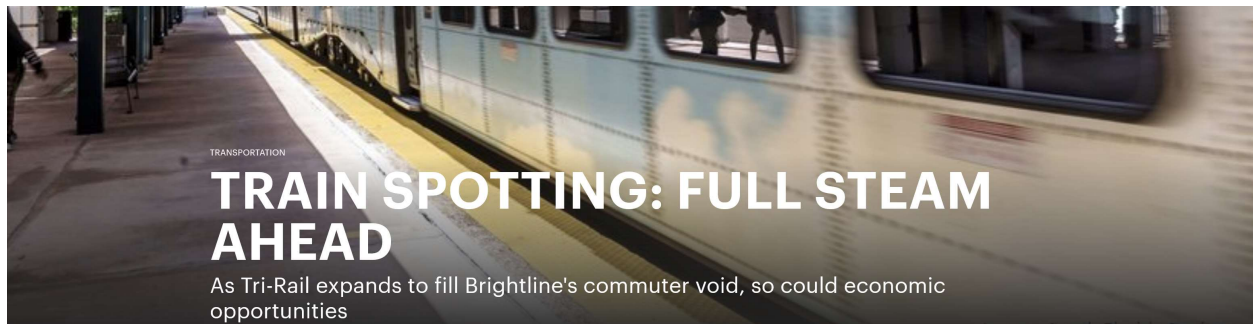


# SOUTH FLORIDA BUSINESS JOURNAL



*As Tri-Rail expands to fill Brightline's commuter void, so could economic opportunities*

*A deal is in the works that could pave the way for Brightline to receive millions of dollars in exchange for providing access for Tri-Rail along the Florida East Coast railway line.*



By Erik Bojnansky – Reporter, South Florida Business Journal - Aug 29, 2024

As Brightline veers away from serving commuters in South Florida, Tri-Rail aims to pick up the slack and could emerge as the top transportation option for the region's workforce.

For decades, Tri-Rail operated on state-owned tracks west of Interstate 95 from Miami International Airport to Mangonia Park near West Palm Beach. That changed earlier this year when Tri-Rail's first station east of I-95 opened within Brightline's MiamiCentral complex.

But now, deals are in the works that could pave the way for a taxpayer-funded, affordable train service to head further east from the downtown Miami station to Broward Health Medical Center in Fort Lauderdale by 2027, county reports indicate.

An expanded passenger rail system will enable South Florida to attract additional companies and provide opportunities for real estate developers to build more transit-oriented projects, economic development experts say.

"A lot of influential developers are bullish on Tri-Rail. Thousands of people are moving to Florida every year, and they're coming from the Northeast U.S., where transit is in their DNA," said John Boyd, principal of Boca Raton-based corporate site selection firm Boyd. "When companies consider leaving Chicago or Boston, one of the boxes they check is access to public transit. And that, in and of itself, becomes an economic recruiting tool."

It will also provide some cost-effective convenience and relief for people who already live and work here, said Edward “Ned” Murray, associate director of Florida International University’s Jorge M. Pérez Metropolitan Center.



*John Boyd, Principal, The Boyd Co., Inc.*

“If we can begin to create these transit coastal links ... it is going to make it a lot better for those who commute to work each day along the FEC corridor and to downtown Miami,” he said.

But it won’t be cheap.

Last year, Miami-Dade County estimated it would cost taxpayers \$538 million to build a commuter line on the Florida East Coast Railway line. However, the new estimate is \$927 million to build a commuter system in Miami-Dade. That figure includes \$330 million in access fees paid to Brightline, which has exclusive passenger rights to the FEC tracks.

A new agreement detailing these terms with Brightline could be presented to Miami-Dade County commissioners as early as October, said County Commissioner Eileen Higgins, who chairs the commission’s transportation committee. She’s confident that state and federal grants and Brightline’s fees from creating station stops in the Design District, Wynwood, Little Haiti and North Miami, and activating a commuter station platform at Brightline’s Aventura Station in Ojus, would cover most of the project’s capital costs.

“We have good, bipartisan support for this,” Higgins added.

Coree Cuff Lonergan, director of Broward County’s transportation department, said a deal is also being pursued by her county that will enable stations to be built in Hollywood, and at Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport and Broward Health Medical Center.



*Edward "Ned" Murray, associate director of Jorge M. Perez Metropolitan Center at Florida International University      Greater Fort Lauderdale Alliance*

We're working really hard with our counterparts in Miami-Dade to bring this project forward," she said. "These are exciting times for commuter rail in both counties."

Who will operate the new system on the FEC line is still up in the air. So far, the only suggestion has been the South Florida Regional Transportation Authority, the public entity that's run Tri-Rail since 1989, with funding from each of the three counties.

SFRTA Executive Director David Dech said that, while his team would love to be part of the new system, it will be up to "some very smart people" in Miami-Dade and Broward.

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*David Dech, executive director of the South Florida Regional Transportation Authority, a taxpayer-funded entity that runs Tri-Rail. South Florida Regional Transportation Authority*

As they [Brightline] were making their changes ... they reached out to us for an alternative for some passengers," SFRTA's Dech said.



*Miami-Dade County  
Commissioner Eileen  
Higgins Miami-Dade  
County*

Those conversations led to the creation of Tri-Rail's weekday express train service aimed at work commuters heading south from Palm Beach and Broward toward Miami's downtown area. With limited stops, the express train leaves Tri-Rail's downtown West Palm Beach station at 6:30 a.m. and arrives at MiamiCentral by 8:05 a.m. An afternoon train departs Miami at 5:35 p.m. and arrives in West Palm Beach by 7:05 p.m.

Additionally, Dech said Tri-Rail is upgrading its fleet of trains, improving existing stations, replacing rail, and removing garbage from the rail corridor's right of way. The agency also began to rebuild its data network to provide Tri-Rail passengers reliable internet service by next year.

“Wi-Fi is not a luxury. It’s an expectation,” he said. “A real public commuter train experience will be different than what we are used to with Brightline, but there is no reason it can’t be a good customer experience.”

### **Tri-Rail seeks to boost commuter needs**

If Tri-Rail can provide a positive experience, more businesses will come to South Florida, said Kelly Smallridge, president of the Business Development Board of Palm Beach County. An express train and reliable internet service are good starts, she added.



*Business Development Board of Palm Beach County President and CEO Kelly Smallridge*

“Our challenge right now is convincing employers that their employees will have multiple different options that isn’t just jumping in a car for their daily commute,” she said.

But the system does need to cover more territory within South Florida to be truly effective, FIU’s Murray said. “Having a premium transit system is really a must for any metro region in the country.”



*Coree Cuff Lonergan,  
director of Broward  
County's transportation  
department. Broward  
County*

Creating such a premium tri-county system isn't just important to attract companies, but to keep them, as well. As it stands, many members of South Florida's cost-burdened workforce are forced to commute longer distances on congested roads and highways.

"We really can't allow the traffic congestion to worsen," Murray said. "That is going to make South Florida more and more unlivable for a lot of workers, and that has really been an issue for businesses here for some time."

A key component of improving commuter transit is containing ticket prices. A Tri-Rail ticket currently costs \$1.25 to \$8.75 one way, and \$2.50 to \$17.50 for a round trip, depending on distance and discounts.

"At the end of the day, this has to be affordable for the kind of salaries regular people make," Miami-Dade Commissioner Higgins said.

### **More train stations provide more building opportunities**

Developers are certainly looking forward to additional train stations along the FEC corridor. Brightline and Tri-Rail stations have attracted numerous development projects and property trades.

Local government incentives, such as decreases in parking requirements and zoning bonuses, encourage developers to pursue transit-oriented development projects. This is especially true of workforce and affordable housing, which can receive density hikes and parking waivers under the state's Live Local Act.

And there is plenty of demand to live near transit stations, especially from those moving to South Florida.

"Transplants from New York and Chicago are not used to driving. They will look at some of these markets where they can live relatively economically and maybe not have to drive," said Gus Alfonso, managing partner of Florida Value Partners, which is co-developing Hub Miami near MiamiCentral.

SFRTA has sought partnerships with developers to build transit-oriented developments by existing Tri-Rail stations. For example, Adler Group and 13th Floor Investments have a lease to build 154 apartments and 28,000 square feet of retail at Tri-Rail's Boca Raton station. The agency is also

seeking bids from developers interested in building at Tri-Rail's Boynton Beach station, and plans to issue a new request for proposals for projects by its Cypress Creek station.

"What we want is a good combination of residential and commercial," Dech said. "The more things you can put on a rail line, like places to live, equals more riders for us."

### **"All aboard" on future Tri-Rail development**

There are several other development plans near Tri-Rail stations, but that's mainly for those along the FEC line. In the 2000s and 2010s, city and state planners proposed building as many as 19 stations along 81 miles of tracks as far north as Jupiter. They envisioned projects in Wilton Manors, Oakland Park, downtown Delray Beach and Palm Beach Gardens.

Still, Tri-Rail Coastal Link, as the plan was dubbed, is a work in progress without steady funding. It also has a major obstacle: the New River. Because the current rail drawbridge shuts down boat traffic every time a train passes, either a new and taller bridge or an underground tunnel will have to be built before any commuter rail expansion can occur.

Nevertheless, even with a passenger rail stop at Broward Health Medical Center, a Miami-to-Fort Lauderdale commuter train would net seven million riders a year, according to a project summary from Broward County Transit. In comparison, Tri-Rail served more than 3.98 million riders in 2023.

Florida Value Partners' Alfonso said expanding Tri-Rail is paramount. While Miami's downtown area is served by Metrorail and Metromover trains, places along the FEC corridor are only accessible by car or bus.

"I remember trying to get off the I-95 exit by Wynwood, and it was just literally backed up, bumper to bumper," he said. "Transportation options are going to be a significant factor for people to determine where they live and how they get around."

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