

All aboard! Central Florida rail services pick up steam



SunRail is looking to extend its commuter service into Osceola County and add a pair of train runs to its daily schedule. It currently serves Orange, Seminole and Volusia counties. (Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda/Staff File Photo)



Brightline trains are to run 235 miles, connecting Miami, Fort Lauderdale, West Palm Beach and Orlando, with plans for a connection at Orlando International Airport. (Joe Raedle/Getty Images)

BY KEVIN SPEAR STAFF WRITER

While shadowed by doubters, delays and dollar troubles, SunRail and Brightline are headed to new eras of passenger rail in Central Florida.

SunRail is looking in July to extend its commuter service into Osceola County and add a pair of train runs to its daily schedule.

Also coming is Brightline's extension this weekend from West Palm Beach and Fort Lauderdale to Miami. That will set the stage for the start of construction soon for a Brightline connection at Orlando International Airport.

"Service will be arriving in 2021," said Orlando airport director Phil Brown of Brightline's stated schedule to link downtown Miami with Florida's busiest airport, Orlando International.

With space for both Brightline and SunRail, the airport has a soaring new train station next to where a second airport terminal is under construction for a 2021 opening.

SunRail advocates hope to someday run their commuter train to the airport, but there are no specific plans for doing so.

For now, SunRail's potential to thrive rests with its first growth spurt, a leg into Osceola County.

Owned and operated by the Florida Department of Transportation, SunRail this month entered its fifth year with 12 stations and 32 miles of track between south Volusia and south Orange counties.

Operating on weekdays, SunRail's ridership has failed to grow, remaining at a little more than 3,000 a day.

The coming expansion will extend 17 miles from south Orange's Sand Lake Road Station into Osceola County, taking in four stations, including one in downtown Kissimmee and the southernmost near Poinciana.

SunRail was set to hold an open house Saturday at the Poinciana Station.

Nicola Liquori, the state's executive director for SunRail, said her agency estimates that operating the southern segment will draw another 2,000 riders a day, boosting SunRail's total daily ridership to more than 5,000.

Also part of starting up service into Osceola, SunRail will expand the number of trains it runs each day.

SunRail's diesel-electric trains now make 18 round trips daily. Liquori said two round trips will be added to the schedule, with one starting south from DeBary at 9 a.m. and the other departing at around noon.

Chief among complaints about SunRail is that it doesn't operate on weekends, nights or often enough during the middle of the day.

The schedule is constrained by the state's budget and limited fare receipts that don't cover even the cost of issuing tickets.

The new round trips are at least "baby steps" toward expanded operation, Liquori said.

Still a challenge for SunRail is a planned but unfunded segment from DeBary to DeLand in Volusia County, where officials are complaining bitterly about potential financial liabilities from not getting that service.

Liquori said the Florida Department of Transportation continues to search for federal funding, which collapsed before the 12-mile section in Volusia could get started.

"We have seen movement in some of the broader, transportation-grant opportunities," Liquori said of her agency's ongoing search for federal support. "The state remains committed."

But the state's involvement has a deadline. In May 2021, Volusia, Seminole, Orange, Osceola and Orlando assume control of SunRail.

While SunRail is a government venture, Brightline bills itself as "the only privately owned, operated and maintained passenger rail system in the United States."

As with SunRail, Brightline has had a rough road. It has faced unfriendly legislation, legal fights and opposition to high-speed trains running through the Treasure Coast region. Yet its backers have continued to ramp up efforts to arrive at Orlando's airport.

Brown, the airport director, said from his recent talks with Brightline and its parent company, All Aboard Florida, the train venture is spending \$160 million on airport property.

That will provide for a maintenance building of 200,000 square feet, more than 6 miles of track and extensive site work.

“They have already invested \$200 million in their phase 2, which is the phase that is most important us,” Brown said. “The land purchases are complete, the engineering and design is complete and the permitting is nearly complete.”

Brown said Brightline’s management team has moved into the airport’s train station.

“Currently there are 14 people housed there and that will grow to approximately 30,” Brown said.

Brightline trains are to run 235 miles, connecting Miami, Fort Lauderdale, West Palm Beach and Orlando in three hours.

Brightline spokeswoman Ali Soule said trains will reach 125 mph along a run of newly installed tracks between Cocoa and the Orlando airport.

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