

SunRail debuts in Osceola

Commuter rail adds 17 miles and four stations



Poinciana Station, which is southwest of Kissimmee and near the community of Poinciana, begins service today. (Kevin Spear/Staff)

BY KEVIN SPEAR STAFF WRITER

SunRail will awaken before sunrise today with more toot in its Central Florida whistle.

That's when the commuter train will begin carrying passengers in Osceola County for the first time.

At 5:45 a.m., a train will leave Poinciana Station, which is southwest of Kissimmee and near the community of Poinciana, and arrive at the downtown Orlando Central Station 36 minutes later.

Google Maps says it typically takes 30 to 45 minutes to drive that distance at that time of day, but as much as an hour if starting out at 8 a.m.

At a bell-ringing, ribbon-cutting gathering Saturday, an often-heard remark about SunRail's new service in Osceola County was: finally.

"Osceola County has waited a long time for this," said Viviana Janer, an Osceola commissioner. "It's going to be great to be connected to the rest of Central Florida."

SunRail began service in May 2014, spanning 32 miles and 12 stations from DeBary Station in south Volusia County to Sand Lake Road Station in south Orange County.

The \$357 million cost was split, with 50 percent federal, 25 percent state and 25 percent local funding.

Construction began in April 2016 on the 17-mile extension south from the Sand Lake Road Station into Osceola.

The new stations are Meadow Woods in Orange County and three in Osceola: Tupperware, Kissimmee and Poinciana.

The extension cost \$187 million, with the same split among the partners.

Retiree Paul Beuther lives in the part of Poinciana that spills into Polk County. He came to the bell-ringing event, which included a celebration ride between the Meadow Woods and Poinciana stations.

He said it took 20 minutes to drive from where he lives to the Poinciana station, a journey that may triple in duration during peak traffic.

Beuther was curious about how useful SunRail would be for him and for Monday-through-Friday workers.

"I don't get the feeling that many people in Poinciana will commute to Orlando for work," Beuther said.

There was more enthusiasm on the passenger deck below where Beuther was sitting.

Randy Austin and Mike Blair own Austin Environmental Consulting in Kissimmee, a block from the SunRail station.

As the SunRail train headed south Saturday, the two checked a schedule, wondering where their employees who live in Orlando would board the train each morning.

The business owners said they are going to buy annual passes for three of their workers to travel between Orlando and Kissimmee.

"You have no excuse now — use the train!" Austin said, speaking of potential riders.

Added Blair: "It's important to support it — buy a ticket."

Riding from the DeBary Station to the Poinciana Station will take about 90 minutes and have a standard fare of \$5 for one way and \$9.50 for a round trip.

Standard, one-way tickets cost \$2 to get on the train and \$1 additionally for each county line crossed.

Even among passengers who rave about SunRail, a common complaint is that its hours are too limited — there is no weekend service — and it goes to too few places.

Nicola Liquori, the state's executive director of SunRail, said the service has carried an average of 3,400 riders recently.

That number bumped up to 3,800 this month when service expanded from 18 round trips per day to 20 round trips per day.

She said the 17-mile extension will add an estimated 2,000 riders a day on average.

"This is a game-changer," Liquori said. "I don't say that lightly."

SunRail has been marked by significant challenges from before its creation and into its uncertain future.

Orange County Mayor Teresa Jacobs noted Saturday that SunRail started as a "pipe dream," was beaten down into "no dream," and then got on "track" with Republican, Democratic and regional support.

Still up in the air is how to connect SunRail with Orlando International Airport.

"To be determined," Liquori said.

Many boosters of SunRail contend that high-density development at its stations would be the system's savior.

At the Tupperware Station Saturday, Tom Roehlk, executive vice president of Tupperware Brands, pointed out medical, commercial and residential construction rising near the station and his company's campus

"We are looking at multi-story, high-rise structures," Roehlk said. "Very soon."

Jose Hoyos, who is promoting development at the Meadow Woods Station, pointed out that, while local governments will assume control of SunRail operations in 2021, there is still no source of cash for doing so.

He advocates dedicating property-tax revenues from zones around SunRail stations — revenues destined to rise because of SunRail service.

"That's the only way," Hoyos said.

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