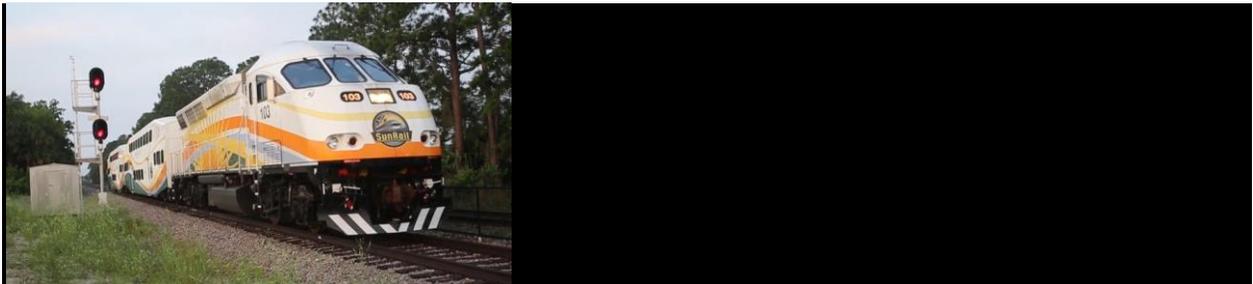


Happy 5-year anniversary, SunRail — now let's make it better | Editorial



The SunRail commuter train serving Central Florida turns five on Wednesday. It's a time to celebrate liberation from Interstate 4 but also a time to reflect on how the train could better serve the region.

Orlando Sentinel Editorial Board

Let's be honest — [SunRail](#) was a consolation prize.

What Central Florida really wanted, really needed, was a light-rail system that ran along Interstate 4. We almost had it, but for a late-night flip-flop in 1999 by former [Orange County](#) Commissioner Clarence Hoenstine.

He cast the surprising and deciding vote against light rail, and an opportunity was lost.

Luckily for Central Florida, not everyone gave up. Soon after the light-rail setback, former U.S. Rep. John Mica was agitating for federal money to build a commuter rail system using existing freight train tracks from Volusia County to [Osceola County](#).

About a dozen years later, on May 1, 2014, SunRail was running.

Yes, running with noisy diesel engines rather than quiet electric trains. Still, the region's commuters finally had an alternative to Interstate 4 just as work was about to begin rebuilding the highway.

And that's something to be grateful for Wednesday as SunRail marks five years operating in Central Florida, moving passengers between the northernmost station in DeBary and the southern terminus in Poinciana.

Even with the interstate in ruins, however, SunRail has been slow to catch on. Its first full fiscal year — July 2014 through June 2015 — saw 959,073 boardings. That fell to 831,460 in the most recent full year.

Then the south Orange and Osceola stations opened in July 2018, and SunRail cracked a million boardings in just the first nine months of the new fiscal year. The southern stations are now among the busiest on the nearly 50-mile line.

SunRail also has benefited from economic innovations. Train riders who don't work near a station can use ride-sharing services like Uber and Lyft, which weren't around when SunRail began service. In Orlando, bike-sharing services like Lime are another option for SunRail users to cover that last mile or two to work.

Communities along the line have benefited, too. Track-side apartment complexes have sprung up in Lake Mary, Longwood, Maitland and Orlando, giving commuters better access to transportation to and from work. New apartments near the DeBary station are under construction.

Businesses near stations in [Winter Park](#) and Orlando have received an injection of new customers riding the train for pleasure.

And not too long from now a whole bunch of college students are going to start living and taking classes at the UCF/Valencia College downtown campus, bringing a whole new crop of potential riders to the Orlando station.

It's all smiles and sunshine, yes? No.

SunRail does a fairly rotten job of marketing itself to the public. The fact that trains aren't packed during the height of the I-4 renovations speaks to those shortcomings. If you can't sell yourself when the highway commute is at its very worst, when can you?

Communities and businesses haven't used the train to their best advantage, especially on busy weekends. While the train has a Monday through Friday schedule, the state has been willing to run it on special occasion if someone else pays the freight. We're still baffled at Winter Park's failure to pony up money to run the train during the city's springtime art show, possibly one of the most frustrating parking experiences of the year in Central Florida.

A key to SunRail's success is linking to Orlando International Airport. Right now, the best path looks like a connection with Virgin Trains at SunRail's Meadow Woods station in south Orange County. Virgin, formerly called Brightline, is the high-speed rail service now operating in South Florida, with plans to reach Orlando International and Disney World. Connecting to the airport would be a game-changer for SunRail, in part because it would add weekend service and more hours of operation.

If there's anything worse than hunting for a parking space at the Winter Park Sidewalk Art Festival it's schlepping bags through a remote airport parking lot after a long business trip. Leaving your car at a *free* SunRail parking lot and hopping a train to OIA is our idea of bliss. It's going to take planning and a financial commitment, but airport service could turn SunRail into an even more essential part of Central Florida's traveling landscape.

Making that airport connection needs to be a priority.

Some of these issues are likely to get more attention once the state stops paying to operate SunRail in a couple of years and local governments assume the financial burden. We suspect that with a heightened sense of ownership will come a greater urgency to make the train more efficient and successful.

And succeed it must. It's hard to imagine returning to a day when so many Central Florida commuters have no option but to face the terrors of Interstate 4.

Editorials are the opinion of the Orlando Sentinel Editorial Board and written by one of its members or a designee. The Editorial Board consists of Opinion Editor Mike Lafferty, Jay Reddick, David Whitley, Shannon Green and Editor-in-Chief Julie Anderson.