SunRail commuter line has cities hoping for economic growth

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By MARK HARPER, Staff Writer

DEBARY -- Hardhats and boots are on the ground, moving in between heavy machinery and trucks to transform a vacant field into a commuter-rail stop.

The $1.3 billion SunRail project has left the station and is set to arrive in 2014. In DeBary, the northernmost stop of the 31-mile first phase, the sights and sounds of construction are building hopes the train is pulling development and jobs right behind it.

This morning, U.S. Rep. John Mica, R-Winter Park, chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee and a powerful advocate for the project, will join state, county and city officials at a formal groundbreaking ceremony for the DeBary stop at 620 S. U.S. 17-92. The event starts at 10 a.m. and parking will be available at Gemini Springs Park, 37 Dirksen Drive, with shuttle service to the site.

Those assembled will likely talk about SunRail as not simply an alternative route for workers to get to Orlando, but as a tool for economic development and job creation.

A second phase will stretch the line to 61 miles, from Poinciana on the south end to DeLand on the north later in the decade.

That infrastructure is the basis for state projections, including the creation of 44,200 jobs in Volusia County alone over the coming years.

The projections are also rooted in a national trend referred to as transit-oriented development.

In cities such as Charlotte, N.C., and Portland, Ore., such development -- a mix of high-density housing, office and commercial buildings -- has brought real results, planners say. But the Tri-Rail commuter train in South Florida, which started in 1989, has remained more of a park-and-ride system with financial problems.
Just how real that economic development will be for Central Florida, and DeBary specifically, is yet to be seen.

BUZZ IN DEBARY

With the train still nearly two years away, it's too early to gauge what kind of development SunRail will bring to DeBary, a city of 19,320. But the City Council has laid out a vision in the form of an Overlay District that will give potential developers more options than the current zoning of the land.

In trying to picture it, start with the station itself. The state's contractors are building a second railroad track next to the existing rail line that parallels U.S. 17-92. Near the intersection with Fort Florida Road, there will be a platform and a park-and-ride lot.

Within a quarter-mile of the platform, the only existing structures are a convenience store and gas station and a mobile-home park. Much of the rest of the surrounding land is vacant, some of it for sale.

The city's Overlay District encourages higher-density housing, such as apartments and condos, within a quarter-mile of the platform, and a mix of commercial, office and public uses also within walking distance, according to Rebecca Hammock, DeBary's planning administrator. The district would allow for as much as 32 development units per acre as well as taller buildings than are typically seen in the city, up to 45 feet for mixed-use projects.

All of the plans have come at a time of economic slowdown, so the SunRail has been viewed as a spark. So far, though, the flame hasn't ignited, say real-estate agents representing landowners in the area.

"The market is not there for DeBary yet. It's not going to be there for some time," said Steve Costa, a broker associate for Charles Wayne Properties Inc., which is marketing a 340-acre tract across U.S. 17-92 from the SunRail station.

Costa, who said he had proposed a 600-home development at that property that was turned down by a previous City Council, said DeBary would do well to start allowing more single-family housing near the station to attract more commercial and high-density proposals.

The full realization of a DeBary transit-oriented development might have to wait for the 11 other initial SunRail stops in Seminole and Orange counties.

Steve Olson, a spokesman for the Florida Department of Transportation, said Lake Mary and Longwood are negotiating with developers at their stops, while Orlando has already attracted a nearly $500 million investment immediately adjacent to the LYNX Station site downtown.
"My feeling is you'll have buy-in once you have developments around those other stations, and they're successful, and you have decent ridership," Costa said.

But Mike Palombi, a Lake Mary real estate agent who is selling a 1-acre parcel near the DeBary station, said a hotter commercial real estate market is for office warehouses, not the kind of high-end mixed-use projects in the city's plans.

"I haven't gotten too much of that so far," Palombi said.

But DeBary City Manager Dan Parrott believes he's seeing the beginning of something.

"We're starting to get more commercial interest, at least more people coming in and asking questions," Parrott said. "There are a couple of retail possibilities in town, not at the (SunRail) station. Most people know the train won't start running until 2014."

**CHARLOTTE'S TRANSIT WEB**

While many of the other stops along SunRail's initial route are already located in urbanized areas, much of DeBary is undeveloped land.

City Councilman Nick Koval, who sits on the SunRail Technical Advisory Committee, is optimistic that his city's blank canvas will ultimately prove attractive.

"I think that in my personal opinion, that's a developer's dream, because (a developer) doesn't have that obstacle of demo-ing and moving things around," Koval said.

Eric Dumbaugh, an associate professor of urban and regional planning at Florida Atlantic University, said he doesn't know a lot about DeBary, specifically, but said the kinds of urban, mixed-use projects in Central Florida such as Celebration and Baldwin Park have been successful.

"These things tend to do well in Orlando," he said. "There's no reason that wouldn't work."

Transit-oriented development has worked in other communities, including Charlotte and Portland. One stop along Portland's MAX train line, Orenco Station in Hillsboro, Ore., has attracted "high-quality" development that's attractive to both retirees and younger adults, he said.

Dumbaugh has seen Charlotte's revitalization firsthand.

"There's a lot of infill housing coming in," he said. "It's all relatively new."

The Charlotte Area Transit System -- CATS -- line opened in 2007, and has generated about $1.4 billion in new projects, said Olaf Kinard, assistant director of public transit.
Property around the line that had been valued at $6 million before construction is now valued at $18 million.

The East-West Station, for example, helped land an 11-story, 310-unit luxury apartment complex.

What's good for the community is also good for the train. Ridership is ahead of schedule, Kinard said. The 15,000 daily riders in 2012 is what had been projected for 2020.

Tri-Rail, a system built in 1989 between West Palm Beach and Miami in South Florida, has been viewed as a train line that has not lived up to the promise of transit-oriented development.

Dumbaugh said Tri-Rail remains a work in progress, with a lot of untapped potential.

"There's a lot of energy around redevelopment (near Tri-Rail) in general," he said.

The urban-sprawl style of development is now limited in South Florida by geography. There's the Atlantic Ocean to the east and the Everglades to the west, and not many greenfield development opportunities left.

"It's a real challenge," he said. "The real solution is going back to building cities. You need transit."

One key difference between Charlotte's system and Tri-Rail is in the train's function. CATS is a light-rail system, with lots of stops, whereas Tri-Rail is a commuter train, with a park-and-ride lot primarily designed for people going to work.

SunRail will be a commuter line.