Private rail tries for comeback in Florida

By Matthew Peddie

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Transcript:

Jeff Horwich: Publicly-supported Amtrak has been financially off the rails for years. So how is it that a purely private rail line is steaming ahead with a route from Miami to Orlando? Florida East Coast Industries aims to get its one billion dollar rail line, All Aboard Florida, running by 2014.

From WMFE in Orlando, here's Matthew Peddie.

Matthew Peddie: Florida East Coast Industries, sometimes known as FEC, already owns 200 miles of track along the 240-mile route. The company says ridership studies show the passenger service can be a success.

Susie Wiles: There’s a demand. People want to ride it, they want the alternative to driving or taking the bus, or in some cases taking a flight.

Susie Wiles, a spokesperson for the project, says the trip will take just under three hours, and cost something in the range of $130 one way. That’s about twice as fast and twice the price of an Amtrak ticket from Orlando to Miami.

Waiting on an Amtrak platform in Orlando, Jerry Dallaire says he’d consider riding the new train if it’s comparable to the cost of gas and tolls.

Jerry Dallaire: Yeah actually, I would. I hate the drive down there. I’ve been reading about it, and if they can get that thing going, I think it would be useful.

Linton McDonald, Jr., says he’d take the train to see friends in Miami.

Linton McDonald, Jr.: If it’s just a once in a blue moon, I’d be prepared to pay whatever the asking price is. Price of convenience, I guess.

Eric Dumbaugh: The real challenge here is getting this thing up for the first time, and what the FEC’s proposed could be a game changer for South Florida.
Eric Dumbaugh, the director of the school of Urban and Regional Planning at Florida Atlantic University, says Amtrak could soon have some competition on its hands. He says the Miami to Orlando corridor is just one of the so-called mega regions in the U.S. where the need for inter-city passenger rail is growing.

**Dumbaugh:** It makes less and less sense for these sorts of trips to be accomplished via the airport. They eat up a lot of airport capacity that might be better served to handle larger and more profitable flights.

Dumbaugh says there are also promising signs for high-speed inter-city rail in Texas, where airlines have blocked it in the past out of fear of competition. And he says if FEC’s privately funded intercity rail line turns a profit, high speed rail could even be back on the table in Florida.

In Orlando, I’m Matthew Peddie for Marketplace.