

TREASURE COAST REGIONAL PLANNING COUNCIL

MEMORANDUM

To: Council Members

AGENDA ITEM 10

From: Staff

Date: January 16, 2015 Council Meeting

Subject: All Aboard Florida Update

Introduction

The purpose of this item is to provide an update regarding activities related to the Florida East Coast Industries' proposed All Aboard Florida (AAF) project. The project is intended to provide new high-speed intercity express service between Miami and Orlando on the Florida East Coast (FEC) rail corridor. Pursuant to the company's application for a Railroad Rehabilitation and Improvement Financing loan, the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) is processing a draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), for which comments were due to the FRA by December 3, 2014.

Background

In 2012, FECI introduced the AAF project, which proposes new intercity express rail service between downtown Miami and Orlando, with additional stations in downtown Fort Lauderdale and downtown West Palm Beach. The project has been the subject of extensive Council, local government, and public discussion since its announcement. As currently proposed, the project would provide sixteen daily round-trip trains, totaling 32 additional trains on the corridor with maximum speeds of 79 miles per hour (MPH) south of West Palm Beach, 110 MPH between West Palm Beach and Cocoa, and 125 MPH from Cocoa to Orlando. The company has indicated the FEC rail corridor will continue to carry freight service, which is projected to increase over time. Although the rail corridor is privately owned, it is included in the Florida Department of Transportation Strategic Intermodal System, which prioritizes it for statewide transportation funding to advance economic competitiveness and quality of life.

General Project Updates

- The FRA is continuing to process the AAF Environmental Impact Statement. While Council's comments were transmitted directly to FRA prior to the December 3, 2014 deadline, the State of Florida has not yet transmitted comments received through the State Clearinghouse, which includes comments from agencies, local governments, and others. In response to Council's request for a meeting with FRA personnel regarding AAF, FRA denied Council's request (see attached letter). The FRA letter stated: "Now that the comment period

has closed, it would not be appropriate to hold meetings with individuals or groups seeking to submit additional comments.”

- The United States Coast Guard (USCG) is continuing to process a Marine Navigational Survey regarding the conditions of three movable bridges along the FEC rail corridor, including bridges at the St. Lucie River, Loxahatchee River, and New River. Although extensive comments were received by USCG by the study’s December 1, 2014 public comment deadline regarding anticipated impacts from the AAF project, Coast Guard representatives have indicated the focus of the study is existing conditions, and the agency’s analysis is not designed to address potential future conditions that could exist with the implementation of the AAF project. USCG representatives have indicated they expect to complete review of all comments in the first quarter 2015. Subsequently, the agency will determine whether or not a rule-making process should be initiated to address bridge operations.
- In late December 2014, the U.S. Department of Transportation (US DOT) authorized AAF to issue up to \$1.75 Million in private activity bonds for the construction of project-related infrastructure. US DOT representatives indicated bonds must be issued by July 1, 2015. However, no bond proceeds can be expended until 45 days after the EIS process has been completed. US DOT representatives indicated the agency was aware of the high degree of public concern associated with the project, which resulted in the EIS completion requirement. Federal statutes require all bond proceeds to be expended within five years of issuance.
- On December 9, 2014, the Nettles Island Community Action Association approved a resolution indicating the community’s concerns regarding the proposed AAF project.

Conclusion

The proposed AAF service represents a unique opportunity to expand the utilization of a private freight corridor for economic benefit and mobility. However, as currently designed, the project provides only one station in the region, which is located in the City of West Palm Beach. There is also an increasing level of concern being raised by local governments and the public regarding a range of issues. Council staff will continue to respond to requests for public information and outreach in an effort to expand Council’s and the public’s knowledge of project-related issues and concerns.

Recommendation

For information purposes only.

Attachment



U.S. Department
of Transportation
**Federal Railroad
Administration**

1200 New Jersey Ave, SE
Washington, DC 20590

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DEC 19 2014

TREASURE COAST
REGIONAL PLANNING COUNCIL

DEC 15 2014

Michael J. Buscha
Executive Director
Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council
421 SW Camden Avenue
Stuart, FL 34994

Dear Mr. Buscha:

This letter is in response to your letter of December 3, 2014, requesting a meeting with Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) personnel regarding the All Aboard Florida (AAF) passenger rail project. Unfortunately, we must deny your request for a meeting for the following reasons.

The public comment period for the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for the AAF project ended on December 3, 2014. We are currently in the process of reviewing all of the comments that were received during the 75-day public comment period and working to complete the FEIS. Our public comment period for this project was almost twice as long as we normally afford for other environmental reviews and we have collected several thousand comments for the record. Now that the comment period has closed, it would not be appropriate to hold meetings with individuals or groups seeking to submit additional comments.

Additionally, we have previously met with representatives of St. Lucie County and Martin County and have toured the proposed alignment with officials from Martin County. We also held three of our eight public meetings along the Treasure Coast. You can be assured that we will give all due and proper consideration to the comments that have been submitted for the record.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Kevin Thompson, Associate Administrator for Communications and Legislative Affairs at 202-366-1299, or via email at kevin.thompson2@dot.gov.

Sincerely,

David Valenstein
Chief
Environmental and Corridor Planning Division
Federal Railroad Administration