

THE NEWS HERALD

On the wrong track

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The idea of restoring Amtrak service to Northwest Florida hasn't left the station yet, and there's no timetable for its arrival, but some local officials are eager to get on board.

They had better not be in any hurry.

The Bay County Transportation Planning Organization recently passed a resolution asking that passenger rail service be restored between Jacksonville and New Orleans. Between 1993 and 2005, Amtrak's Sunset Limited ran from Los Angeles to Florida (first Miami, later Orlando), making it the only transcontinental passenger train in America. It included stops in Chipley and Crestview.

However, the New Orleans-to-Florida leg was abandoned after Hurricane Katrina hit the region in August 2005. Even though damaged tracks were repaired, Amtrak decided the route wasn't worth resurrecting.

Indeed, in May 2005, four months before the service was suspended, then-Transportation Secretary Norm Mineta said the Sunset Limited was unprofitable and should be discontinued. The route lost \$466 per rider and carried only 96,000 passengers — much less than the 554,000 riders on the railroad's most popular long-distance route that links Chicago with the Pacific Northwest.

Amtrak also has said the service was ineffective and made little financial sense for a company with limited resources. Since its inception in 1971, the taxpayer-subsidized rail service has operated solely in the red and requires approximately \$1.3 billion in federal funding each year. Last year Amtrak lost \$450 million.

In recent years it has been negotiating with states to share the costs of intrastate train service, such as between Lynchburg, Va., and Washington, D.C., and a Pittsburgh-Harrisburg-Philadelphia line in Pennsylvania. Last year, states paid Amtrak about \$180 million to operate trains.

Proponents claim these short-distance trains (routes of 200 to 600 miles) are growing in popularity — the Brookings Institution calls it a “renaissance” — but that's a relative measurement. Randal O'Toole of the Cato Institute points out that a study by DePaul University found that intercity bus travel is growing more than twice as fast as Amtrak.

O'Toole also calculated that 2011 airfares averaged just 13.8 cents per passenger mile and subsidies to air travel added 2.8 cents more. “By comparison,” he writes, “Amtrak fares were 31 cents and subsidies added 28 cents more per passenger mile, making Amtrak's total costs nearly four times greater than the costs of flying. Intercity driving is about the same as air travel (but with smaller subsidies), while intercity buses are even less expensive.”

Supporters of restoring the Sunset Limited say the old route lacked sufficient passengers because it operated only twice a week and came through the Panhandle at inopportune times. They believe daily service would attract more customers.

Perhaps, but how many — and at what cost? Passenger rail succeeds in dense urban corridors, such as the Northeast. But for long-range trips or medium distances between remote destinations, it's still a niche mode of transportation, appealing mostly to the nostalgic, the patient and the one-timers (“Wouldn't it be nice to take the train for a change?”).

It's doubtful that there are enough of them to make a state or federal subsidy appealing in these times of tight budgets. Without sufficient demand, the Sunset Limited is unlikely to get back on track anytime soon.