

SunRail: Will the \$1.2 billion commuter train pay off?

By William Patrick

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After years of planning, a \$1.2 billion taxpayer commitment and the promise of thousands of jobs, Orlando area residents finally caught a glimpse of the SunRail commuter train.

According to one glowing media report, elected officials joined a “thrilled” crowd of 500 onlookers in Winter Park on Saturday for the unveiling of the 62-mile publicly financed railway project.

“I want to see if it’s something we can use frequently,” one prospective rider told the Orlando Sentinel. A full round-trip ticket is only \$5.

That may sound like a good deal, but according to SunRail’s own figures the light rail train costs a lot more.

The total construction cost reportedly stands at \$615 million. The federal government is paying 50 percent, while the state and five Central Florida local governments are splitting the remaining half.

The initial \$432 million cost slated for acquiring existing railway tracks has already jumped to \$650 million.

The state will also fund all operating and maintenance costs for seven years, after which area local governments will pick up the tab.

In April, the Florida Department of Transportation announced a \$195 million contract with Bombardier Transportation, a Canadian firm, for operating and maintenance expenses.

But the likelihood of recouping these costs is nil, according to Randal O’Toole of the libertarian Cato Institute.

In a 2010 policy report, O’Toole concluded, “no transit line in the country comes close to covering its operating costs, much less its total costs.”

If true, that would leave taxpayers on the hook even though most Floridians will rarely or may never ride the rail.

The one-to-three car trains hold up to 150 passengers per car. Using SunRail's own projections, ridership will peak in 2030 with 7,400 daily trips, or 3,700 round trips, in an area of over 3.3 million residents.

But that's missing the point, advocates say. Accessible public transportation and the potential for jobs and economic growth are worth the broad taxpayer support.

Before cutting a ceremonial ribbon and officially opening the train doors Saturday, Winter Park Mayor Ken Bradley referred to the SunRail as the "backbone of Florida."

Phase one, or the first 32-miles of the track, is scheduled to begin operation May 2014. The remaining stretch will be completed in 2016.

In case you missed Saturday's event, here's your own SunRail sneak-peek. (The video was produced by Ride SunRail prior to the public unveiling).