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Local station may be busiest; All Aboard study shows West Palm Beach as most-used site in 2019

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All Aboard Florida's \$29 million train station planned in downtown West Palm Beach is expected to be the company's busiest South Florida stop, providing more than 3,800 trips a day by 2019, according to a ridership and revenue study included in a recent bond sale for the private rail project.

The study estimates that 1,839 passengers a day will board trains at the West Palm Beach station planned between Datura and Evernia streets to the west of the Florida East Coast Railway tracks. It shows 1,987 passengers a day are expected to get off at the West Palm Beach stop.

The Fort Lauderdale and Miami stations are expected to provide just over 3,400 trips a day by 2019, the study shows.

All Aboard Florida plans to run express passenger rail service from Miami to Orlando in just three hours on the Florida East Coast Railway tracks, with stops in Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach. The Miami-to-West Palm Beach service is expected to open in late 2016 with the Orlando leg beginning in 2017.

Palm Beach County tourism leaders wouldn't comment specifically on All Aboard Florida's ridership numbers but said the express trains will give tourists traveling between Miami and Orlando an easy way to explore West Palm Beach and surrounding areas.

David Semadeni of the Palm Beach County Hotel and Lodging Association said tourists visiting the Orlando area and its theme parks often fly to Miami and then rent a car and drive north.

"You get in a car and bang up the Turnpike, and there isn't even a sign saying West Palm Beach,"

Semandeni said. "What is going to happen now is people are going to jump on a train. It is bound to have a positive influence."

Jorge Pesquera, president and CEO of Discover The Palm Beaches, the county's tourism marketing arm, agreed.

"We believe that millions of people are driving between Miami and Orlando, and they are passing through the western side of Palm Beach County and have no idea what we have to offer here," he said.

Miami International Airport has nonstop service from 93 international cities and 48 domestic cities, Pesquera said. Fort Lauderdale's airport has service between 43 international destinations and 58 domestic cities, he added.

"That volume of incoming fly travelers whether it is international or domestic is a wonderful indication of the volume of visitors in South Florida south of Palm Beach County," Pesquera said. "Giving them the opportunity every hour on the hour to get on the train ... It can only mean that a lot of people will want to explore Palm Beach County for a night or two."

Ridership at the West Palm Beach station is expected to grow to more than 4,317 trips a day by 2030, the study found. Fort Lauderdale and Miami are expected to provide slightly more than 3,800 trips a day by 2030, according to the study.

By 2019, the company estimates it will have 2.6 million riders.

Joshua Schank, president and CEO of the Eno Center for Transportation in Washington, D.C., said downtown West Palm Beach has more amenities and activities surrounding the proposed All Aboard Florida station than Miami, which could account for the higher passenger projections in the early years of service.

But, he said, when the \$150 million Miami station is finished, the passenger pattern may change. All Aboard Florida is planning for an "iconic destination" in Miami that will include apartments, shops, restaurants and offices.

"In Miami, the density around the station right now is OK, but it's quite good in West Palm Beach's downtown," Schank said. "Knowing what I know about Palm Beach, there may be some greater initial opportunities there."

Cato Institute rail expert Randal O'Toole is a fan of passenger rail and said he hopes All Aboard Florida is a success without government subsidies, but he casts some doubt on the ridership numbers.

He said All Aboard Florida appears to be counting on capturing most, if not all, of Tri-Rail's passengers plus bus ridership.

"This is possible, but not at the fares projected in the study, which at \$30 are a lot higher than Tri-Rail's \$6.90 or Greyhound's \$7 advance purchase on the Web," he said. "A lot of people are willing to spend an extra 45 minutes to save \$23."

An All Aboard Florida bond prospectus says a coach class ticket from Miami to West Palm Beach will begin at \$30 during the opening year of service and climb to \$31.84 by 2019. Business class tickets will begin at \$36.60 and climb to \$38.84. All Aboard Florida would not say whether those prices are for roundtrip tickets or one-way.

According to the ridership study, All Aboard Florida will act as "complement" to Tri-Rail and other transportation systems, not competition. Just 3.5 percent of the overall travel market within Southeast Florida involves public modes of travel, the study notes. That's expected to climb to 11.4 percent with All Aboard Florida, including traffic from tourism.

Special events in West Palm Beach, such as SunFest, which is within walking distance of the proposed station, were included as draws in the ridership study. But other attractions, less easily accessible, were also included, such as equestrian events in Wellington, and the South Florida Fair.

O'Toole is also skeptical of ridership estimates from Miami to Orlando. Airlines that already make the trip from Miami to Orlando in one hour will be a major rival for All Aboard Florida, he said, noting that while airfare currently may cost \$300, airlines have the ability to significantly decrease costs if they sense serious competition.

"Frequent travelers can now bypass most airport security through pre-check, which effectively eliminates the time-disadvantage of flying short distances," O'Toole said.

The Louis Berger Group, the company hired by All Aboard Florida to complete the ridership study, did not return a call for comment.

Transportation analysts said predicting ridership can be tricky because there are so many factors to consider.

"One doesn't know how the competition might respond, including airlines and intercity bus services," said Steven Polzin, director of mobility policy for the University of South Florida's Center for Urban Transportation.

Polzin was reluctant to "pass judgment" on All Aboard Florida's ridership study.

"This service concept and technology is relatively new domestically, and, as such, it's more difficult to have a high degree of confidence in estimates of ridership," Polzin said.