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## TRANSPORTATION



Alex Brandenberger, of Fort Myers, rides along the railroad tracks on the Linear Park bike path Wednesday. JACK HARDMAN/THE NEWS-PRESS

# SW Florida eyes the fast track for proposed railroad corridor

Planners urge state to buy CSX line for future rapid transit, other services

By Don Ruane  
Special to The News-Press

Regional transportation planners want Florida to buy the CSX rail line running through Lee and Collier counties to secure a corridor for future rapid transit commuter services, freight services and pedestrian and bicycle uses.

The Lee County Metropolitan Planning Organization, made up of local elected officials, voted last month to encourage the state to make the purchase and move ahead with the long-term transportation plan. Members voted after hearing a presentation about a new study looking at the feasibility of the move.

"The most important recommendation from this study is the preservation of the



## Right of way ripe for recreation, rail passengers

The Lee County Metropolitan Planning Organization, which is made up of local elected officials, is recommending that the state purchase the 37-mile right-of-way of the CSX rail line. The idea would be to develop a long-term plan for light rail and recreation.

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SOURCE: CSX/Seminole Gulf Rail Corridor Feasibility Study

THE NEWS-PRESS

**37**

The number of miles of track running from the Charlotte County line to Vanderbilt Beach in Collier County

**7,000**

The number of carloads of freight shipped in 2012

**2047**

The year Seminole Gulf's lease with CSX ends

**\$5 million - \$15 million**

Estimated cost to buy the land from CSX

## EVERGLADES



Pilot whales are stranded on a beach in a remote area of the western portion of Everglades National Park. AP

# Outlook grim for stranded whales

10 dead; four dozen stuck in shallow water

Associated Press

**EVERGLADES NATIONAL PARK** — Wildlife workers in boats struggled unsuccessfully Wednesday to coax nearly four dozen pilot whales out of dangerous shallow waters in Florida's Everglades National Park, hoping to spare them the fate of 10 others that already had died.

The workers suspended their efforts after dark, but planned to return Thursday morning to try again, said Kim Amendola, spokeswoman for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which is taking part in the effort.

Six of the whales were found dead, and four of the whales had to be destroyed Wednesday, said Blair Mase, coordinator for NOAA's marine mammal stranding network. At least three could be seen on the beach, out of the water.

The whales are stranded in a remote area near Highland Beach, the western boundary of Everglades National Park and about 20 miles east of where they normally live. It takes more than an hour to reach the spot from the nearest boat ramp and there is no cellphone service, complicating rescue efforts.

"We want to set the expecta-

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## Railroad

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rail corridor for the future residents of Lee County,” says the study led by David Plummer & Associates. “It would be nearly impossible to recreate this corridor today — a 37-mile, unimpeded, north-south corridor in urbanized Lee County.”

Major projects develop in increments, said Bonita Springs Mayor Ben Nelson, who added it’s time to start preparing for the growth over the next 20 years.

“We’re going to look like idiots if we don’t jump on this. It’s going to be a great corridor for us,” Nelson said.

The right-of-way ranges from 40 feet in Fort Myers to 200 feet in outlying areas.

CSX of Jacksonville owns the land under the tracks.

Seminole Gulf Railway leases the property from CSX and owns the trains, rails and other equipment. Seminole also operates the dinner mystery train that runs between Fort Myers and Punta Gorda.

The study looked at the corridor between the Lee-Charlotte County line and Vanderbilt Beach in Collier County.

Passenger service is a long-term goal, said Ron Talone of David Plummer & Associates, which has an office in Fort Myers.

The bicycling community also is looking forward to the day it can ride along the corridor, said bicycle advocate Dan Moser.

“There’s always hope when studies are going on. It’s the spine of our county. All I can say is keep studying and do what you need to do to get the funds,” Moser said.

### A fresh look

This is the first study of its kind, said land planning consultant Bill Spikowski, who also worked on the study. State ownership would bring public control back to Florida authorities from federal railroad regulators, he said.

“It would put the public



A motorcyclist crosses the train tracks at Palm Beach Boulevard. Regional planners want to buy the line from CSX.

in position to say something about the future of that corridor,” Spikowski said. “In the long run, it’s a pretty big deal.”

But it would cost hundreds of millions of dollars to acquire and add transit to the corridor, which is a freight lifeline for local businesses that rely on the railroad to move lumber, building supplies, refrigerated goods, newsprint and scrap metal.

The broad cost estimates in the study include the cost of upgrading the track. Train speeds are limited to 10 mph throughout most of the corridor, although 25 mph is allowed in some areas.

The study also recommends another study be done to establish the value of the CSX right-of-way to Arcadia and a corridor in Sarasota County.

Not everyone at the meeting was in favor of the idea. Fort Myers City Councilman Tom Leonardo questioned the potential for continuing freight service and a low-technology train system when other places are moving toward high-speed rail service.

“It is so yesterday news and is there a demand for passenger service,” Leonardo said. “We’re working with pie in the sky.”



Passengers on the Seminole Gulf Railway Murder Mystery Dinner Train take their seats as the train prepares to leave the depot Wednesday. PHOTOS BY JACK HARDMAN/THE NEWS-PRESS

The high-speed rail will be in the middle of Interstate 75, Talone said.

Cape Coral City Councilman John Carioscia sided with Leonardo, saying private enterprise should pay for itself and this would become a subsidy for railroads.

“The lease with CSX ends in 2047. This is a long punt away,” said Robert Fay of Seminole Gulf Railway. “The corridor should be preserved, but let private industry do that. You’re talking about preserving a corridor that isn’t going anywhere.”

“CSX has not been involved in any discussions related to this proposed

project with FDOT or with Seminole Gulf Railway, the short-line railroad that operates on this corridor,” CSX spokeswoman Kristin Seay said.

The study recommends the continuation of freight services along with adding rapid transit by rail or by bus. But the future of freight service is cloudy.

The line has served the area’s freight needs for decades, but the economic downturn cut the use in half for Lee County. About 7,000 carloads of freight were shipped in 2012 compared to 14,000 to 15,000 in the recent past, according to the report. Shipping

trends also show a shift toward using trucks and the condition of the tracks adds to the uncertainty about rail freight use in the future, the report said.

The corridor is suitable for use by a commuter rapid transit, light-rail transit or a bus transit. A multiuse shared path could be a compatible use in the wider stretches of the corridor.

### Cost estimates

Acquiring the land, adding transit and a shared path would cost millions. The report doesn’t go deeply into specific costs, but it does give some estimates.

### RAILROAD TERMS

» Commuter rapid transit relies on heavier trains and operates at a relatively high speed on an exclusive right-of-way and with train stations.

» A light-rail system operates more frequently at lower speeds. Passengers on some systems can get on and off at street level. Power often is supplied by overhead electrical cables.

» A rapid bus transit system uses a dedicated road or lanes to deliver people by bus to their destinations.

### RAIL HISTORY

» The railroad era began in Lee County in 1902, when the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad bought Henry B. Plant’s railroad and extended the line from Punta Gorda to Fort Myers. A station and depot were planned at Monroe Street.

» The final tracks were laid on Feb. 20, 1904.

» The first passenger train arrived in 1904. Excursions trains brought hungry, thirsty and tired passengers who visited local businesses.

The estimated cost to buy the land from CSX is \$5 million to \$15 million. The state could then collect rent from Seminole Gulf for the remaining years of its lease.

To buy out Seminole Gulf’s interest in the lease without track improvements could cost \$65 million to \$104 million.

To buy out Seminole Gulf’s interest with track improvements could cost \$87 million to \$125 million.

Buying out both CSX and Seminole Gulf and making track improvements could cost \$92 million to \$140 million.

Using similar projects, the report estimates it would cost as much as \$20 million per mile to add commuter rail service, \$40 million for bus rapid transit and \$120 million for light rail.