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MPO Approves Central Florida Commuter Rail Project Resolution

TAVARES – Commuter rail continues to catch momentum as officials from Lake County recently supported the Central Florida Commuter Rail Project with the caveat that they want to see commuter rail services into Lake County.

The Lake-Sumter Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) approved Dec. 3 a resolution supporting the 61.5-mile Central Florida Commuter Rail Project as part of the board's regularly scheduled meeting. The resolution supports the design, construction and implementation of the Central Florida Commuter Rail Project and requests the Florida Legislature to approve fair and reasonable insurance provisions as recommended by the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT).

The resolution goes on to endorse an update of a 1999 feasibility study of the "Northwest Corridor" from downtown Orlando, through Apopka to Lake County. Outgoing Eustis city commissioner James Rotella "wholeheartedly" made the motion to approve the resolution of support. "With the plans of Eustis including downtown redevelopment and a multi-modal approach to transportation, it just makes sense for Eustis and this MPO to support commuter rail."

Eustis is one of three Lake County cities that have an existing railway in the downtown of the community. Mount Dora and Tavares also benefit from the rail line, which is operated by the Florida Central Railroad. From Eustis and Mount Dora, the short-line railroad runs south through Tavares to Apopka and then Orlando where the line meets the CSX A-Line.

The commuter rail resolution generated one of the lengthier discussions in recent times by the MPO. The resolution contained a total of 16 supporting points. The points detailed the history of the project and the agreements reached with local governments along the corridor, as well as detailing the social and environmental benefits including: quality of life, economic growth and employment opportunities.

Ben Biscan, executive director of the Florida Central Railroad, sits on the board of the MPO representing the rail agency. He provided insight to the board on the intricacies of the insurance and liability issues surround the project. "I can tell you that the deal for DOT to buy the A-Line from CSX is the new model for making passenger rail and freight rail work together on the same line," he explained. "By the state having control over the line, they have control over scheduling and train prioritization, which is important for commuter rail."

The project is viewed by transportation experts as a catalyst for smart growth in the central Florida region. Florida is already at risk of being declared an air quality non-attainment area, which could result in federal sanctions being imposed. The commuter rail project would reduce the growth of vehicle emissions in the region and likely aid in achieving new air-quality standards.

Successful implementation of the 61.5 mile Central Florida Commuter Rail spine, along with a favorable feasibility study of the "Northwest Corridor" (Lake County's own commuter rail project, Golden Triangle to Orlando) could enable a regional commuter rail connection to Lake County, with potential stations in the cities of Tavares, Eustis and Mount Dora.

FDOT studied the Northwest Corridor rail project back in 1999 and the outcome was not favorable for a successful rail operation because of the lack of any fixed route bus service to feed the rail project and the lack of sufficient population densities to support the commuter rail. Since that time Lake County has implemented the LakeXpress fixed route bus service which serves all of the potential rail stations, newly adopted downtown redevelopment plans of Tavares and Eustis, which incorporate commuter rail into the future plans and the addition of significant urban population increases the Golden Triangle area of Lake.

The MPO is working with Lake County Board of County Commissioners as well as the municipalities of Tavares, Eustis, and Mount Dora and the Central Florida Railroad, to partner with Florida Department of Transportation, Orange County, the City of Orlando, and the City of Apopka to initiate the update of the Commuter Rail Feasibility Study of the Northwest Corridor. Formal actions to initiate the study have been put on hold until the Central Florida Commuter Rail Project is approved by the Florida Legislature.

In other news from the MPO, the Governing Board approved the MPO's legislative platform which includes the following items: (1) advancing the Central Florida Commuter Rail project, (2) create a Florida Transportation Revenue Study Commission, (3) protect the Transportation Trust Fund, (4) modify the Charter County Parity, (5) authorize a \$2 local option rental car surcharge, (6) and legislation to allow law enforcement to issue traffic citations for red light running enforcement through use of technology.

A slate of 2009 officers for the MPO was approved by the board. Clermont councilmember Ray Goodgame was elected to serve as chairman. Sumter County commissioner Michael Francis will serve as Chairman-Elect, Leesburg city commissioner Sanna Henderson will serve as 1st Vice-Chairman and Lake County commissioner Jennifer Hill will serve as 2nd Vice-Chairman.

The MPO also approved a resolution supporting the preparation of a reapportionment plan to include all of Sumter County, including the municipalities of Wildwood, Bushnell, Coleman, Webster and Center Hill. Currently only a small area in the northeast corner of Sumter County is officially recognized as part of the MPO area per the original apportionment document of 2003. These documents were based on the 2000 Census. Since that time, the urbanization has expanded dramatically south and west to Wildwood.

The MPO and Sumter County Board of County Commissioners signed interlocal agreements enhancing the MPO's involvement in Sumter County's transportation planning. The reapportionment would fully legitimize the MPO's role interacting with the multiple layers of government including Federal Highway Administration, Federal Transit Administration, Florida Department of Transportation, Florida Commission for the Transportation Disadvantages and others.

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