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Monday, October 27, 2014

The Palm Beach Post

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What to expect at next week's All Aboard Florida hearings

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Posted: 11:42 a.m. Friday, Oct. 24, 2014

By [Kimberly Miller](#) and [Jennifer Sorentroue](#) - Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Public forums to discuss All Aboard Florida's impact on communities settled along the Florida East Coast Railway tracks begin Monday, but opponents of the passenger rail project say the format of the federally organized gatherings restricts commenting and may cow critics.

The eight "open house"-style meetings on the draft environmental study released last month will allow attendees to speak individually with experts familiar with different aspects of the 520-page report.



All Aboard Florida's design for its West Palm Beach train station includes 30,000 square feet of air conditioned space with a ... [Read More](#)

An estimated 30 stations set up at each hearing will provide details on key issues, a communal area with a large-screen display will hit on general information, and two computer simulations will be running of a drawbridge closing for

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a train and a train crossing through an intersection.

But instead of a formal public hearing where people take turns speaking with a microphone, a court reporter will record concerns on a one-on-one basis in a semi-private area at the events. Each person will have three minutes.

“We have used this format frequently with environmental impact statement meetings, and in our experience the open house format provides a much better environment for the exchange of information and allows for greater input,” said a Federal Railroad Administration spokesman, who emphasized that comments are also accepted in writing and by mail or email.



LANNIS WATERS

A southbound FEC freight train passes Monroe Drive in West Palm Beach Tuesday morning, June 4, 2014. (Lannis Waters / The ... [Read More](#)

Steve Ryan, a Washington, D.C.-based attorney representing Citizens Against Rail Expansion, likened the format to a “science fair” and said open dialogue in a public setting is a crucial part

of the All Aboard Florida debate.

“If I want to ask an important question, why can’t they answer it in front of everyone?” Ryan said. “That’s what adults do. Not me sitting down with a court reporter and it going into a super-secret echo chamber.”

All Aboard Florida said in a statement it had no comment on the format of the meetings, but will have representatives available to answer questions.



RICHARD GRAULICH

Buttons are handed out against the proposed All Aboard Florida project during a press conference at Jupiter Medical Center on October ... [Read More](#)

The meetings, the first of which is Monday in Miami, have been highly anticipated by All Aboard Florida opponents who see the environmental impact process as one of the few ways to fight the private company’s plan to run 32 express passenger trains per

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Feedback

day from Miami to Orlando on the FEC tracks.

While Miami-Dade and Broward counties have favored the project, which will have stops in Miami, Fort Lauderdale, West Palm Beach and Orlando, northern Palm Beach County residents and those in the Treasure and Space coasts have been more adverse.

To be sure, there are supporters in northern counties. Debbie Harvey, president of the iconic Cocoa Beach landmark Ron Jon Surf Shop, Cocoa Mayor Henry Parrish, and Canaveral Port Authority CEO John Walsh spoke in favor of All Aboard at a meeting last week in Brevard County.

But traffic delays, boater backups at drawbridges and increased noise as more trains are added to the tracks are just a few of the concerns opponents hope to relay to federal officials.

Road crossings are expected to be closed three times per hour for two passenger trains and one freight train. Closure times are expected to range from 1.7 minutes for the passenger train to 2.8 minutes for freight. The number of freight trains is also expected to increase from the current 14 trains per day to 20 by 2016.

Daily closures to the Loxahatchee River bridge over the Jupiter Inlet, which will impeded boat traffic, will increase from 16 to 42, but with improvements to the bridge, the average single closure time would decrease from 20 minutes to 12, according to the environmental report. Still, the bridge is expected to be closed a total of 8.6 hours per day during the week, and 7.2 hours per day on the weekends.

“We’re not sure the format will allow for full open public discussion,” said Michael Kennedy, president of the Marine Industries Association of Palm Beach County, who is also dismayed there is no meeting scheduled in the boater-friendly Jupiter area. “I believe people will be intimidated. It doesn’t seem as user-friendly as it could be.”

Still, the open house format for environmental impact meetings isn’t unusual.

The All Aboard public hearings will mimic the model used by federal officials in 2007 to gather public comments for another environmental impact study evaluating a proposed runway expansion plan at Palm Beach International Airport.

At the PBIA hearing, residents were not allowed to publicly comment on the runway study. Instead, they were required to submit their concerns in writing or have them transcribed by a court reporter.



At the time, residents opposed to the expansion project expressed frustration with the process, arguing they wanted to publicly voice their concerns, not submit them in writing.

Rick Rose, an owner of a West Palm Beach bed and breakfast three blocks west of the FEC tracks, said the format for Wednesday's All Aboard Florida hearing in West Palm Beach will allow all members of the public to view the study and have their comments reported.

"You don't want to take away any time from people really giving their official statements," said Rose, a longtime West Palm Beach resident who was also involved with the airport's runway study. "Even with the runway, they did collate all of that information and afterwards you could access it."

Rose has supported the All Aboard Florida project, saying it will help increase safety, improve infrastructure and quiet trains along the FEC tracks. Money from the Broward and Palm Beach transportation planning groups, combined with All Aboard Florida funding, will help pay for safety upgrades that will allow for quiet zones in the two counties.

"If All Aboard Florida is not financially viable, who cares?" Rose said. "There is no skin off my nose. But those safety upgrades are there to remain. They're not going to remove quiet zones, gates and take the curbs back down to street level. We will have that infrastructure, regardless of whether AAF survives or not."

The Coast Guard is also scheduling public comment meetings for mid-November, but did not have exact dates as of Friday. Previously scheduled meetings were postponed to find larger venues following "demands of the boating public."

All Aboard Florida expects to start running trains from Miami to West Palm Beach in late 2016. The second leg to Orlando would begin in 2017.

The company is seeking \$1.75 billion in tax exempt bonds to supplement or replace a \$1.6 billion Federal Railroad Administration loan it had previously applied for and which is still pending approval. The U.S. Department of Transportation must approve the bonds, but All Aboard Florida officials have said they hope to issue them by the end of the year.

KC Traylor, a Palm City resident and founder of Not All Aboard Florida, is encouraging people to voice their concerns at the Coast Guard and environmental meetings.



“The fact of the matter is this is not a done deal,” Traylor said.

The comment period ends Dec. 3. To submit comments by email or mail, address correspondence to the attention of John Winkle either at AAF_comments@yhb.com, or Federal Railroad Administration, 1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE, Room W38-311, Washington, DC 20590.

The Federal Railroad Administration will conduct eight public hearings on the project before making a final ruling:

Oct. 27, 3:30 - 7 p.m., Miami-Dade College - Wolfson Campus, James K. Batten Room, 300 NE 2nd Ave., Miami.

Oct. 28, 3:30 - 7 p.m., Broward County Convention Center, 1950 Eisenhower Blvd., Fort Lauderdale.

Oct. 29, 3:30 p.m. - 7 p.m., West Palm Beach Marriott, 1001 Okeechobee Blvd., West Palm Beach.

Oct. 30, 3:30 p.m. - 7 p.m., The Kane Center, 900 SE Salerno Rd., Stuart.

Nov. 5, 3:30 p.m. - 7 p.m., Indian River State College, Richardson Hall, 6155 College Lane, Vero Beach.

Nov. 6, 3:30 p.m. - 7 p.m., Port St. Lucie Civic Center, 9221 SE Civic Center Place, Port St Lucie.

Nov.12, 3:30 p.m. - 7 p.m., Cocoa Civic Center, 430 Delannoy Ave., Cocoa.

Nov. 13, 3:30 p.m. - 7 p.m. Wyndham Orlando Resort I-Drive, 800 International Drive, Orlando.



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FHMullane

Rep

We don't need it. I don't care that they float bonds. Florida residents are going to pay for something they don't need with money they don't have. Isn't that what is wrong with America? Bad idea and it is being pushed to help Disney and future freight.

5:13 p.m. Oct. 24, 2014

Feedback

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