Just over two years ago, in the summer of 2012, RAIL Magazine #30 reported on the then-under construction SunRail system serving Orlando and Central Florida. At that time, tracks were being laid and rolling stock acquired for Central Florida’s first modern rail system.

On April 30, 2014 (right on schedule, incidentally), SunRail was launched with initial service running between DeBarry to the north of Orlando and the Sand Lake Road Station to the city’s south. All told, the line covers 31 miles and makes 12 stops. Initially, SunRail is operating only on weekdays, with commuter service between 5:30 a.m. and 9:00 a.m. and then 3:30 p.m. to 7:00 p.m., being the system’s peak schedule. In between those periods, SunRail operates on two-hour headways. Fares for SunRail are $2 one-way plus an additional $1 for every county line crossed.

Ridership Ebbs and Flows

Initial ridership on the line was 33,800 in May, followed by 87,100 in June. SunRail officials acknowledged a dip in ridership (about 13 percent) in August, and then again in September (another 15 percent). In response to the recent declines, the system will be reinstituting its SunRail Ambassadors at each station during peak morning and afternoon periods.
periods and at key stations throughout the day.

The Orlando Sentinel’s Mike Lafferty, who has invited local newspaper readers to ride along as he transforms from car commuter to SunRail rider, sums up the reaction to the dip in ridership thusly: “The rail haters have seized on the August decline — just as they did SunRail’s nearly unmanageable popularity when it first began service — as a sign of the commuter rail apocalypse. Don’t listen to the haters. Ridership will ebb and flow. And even with the August ebb the numbers aren’t far from ridership projections. What’s certain is that SunRail’s going to be an important relief valve when workers start demolishing Interstate 4 next year. There’s nothing like an already hellish commute becoming even worse to drive people toward an alternative.”

Service Extensions in the Works

Just a couple of months after the launch (in July) local residents gathered up the requisite number of signatures (1,700) calling on the Central Florida Commuter Rail Commission to extend service to evenings and weekdays. The Commission, in response, released a number of steps that will need to be taken before full exploration of weekend and evening service can begin, including developing an operational plan, securing the necessary rolling stock and renegotiating agreements with the CSX freight railroad. The Commission hopes to have much of this done and a plan developed for the expanded service by the end of the year.

In addition to weekend and evening service, SunRail is actively considering expanding service to Orlando International Airport — the 13th busiest airport in the U.S. SunRail officials have targeted 2020 as their initial goal for airport service and have set aside $5 million to fully study the potential service (for more information about why rail and transit studies cost so much, see our extensive analysis in RAIL #33 — ed).

Officially, this service is known locally as phase three of the SunRail project rollout. Phase two is already underway, extending the service north to DeLand. And though in preliminary design, the extension into Osceola County — bringing on-line four new SunRail stations — has already included the purchase of more than a dozen right-
of-way parcels. Phase three — the southern extension of the service — now includes a 5.5-mile run to the Orlando International Airport.

The I-4 Influence

Next February, 21 miles of Interstate 4 — which bi-sects the Orlando region — will begin a $2.3 billion rehabilitation featuring the complete tear down and rebuilding of sections of the roadway and ramps. What’s expected to emerge from the six-year project will include new tolling lanes.

The onset of this major road project and its inevitable impact on commuters is one reason why the May 2014 launch date for SunRail was so vital: to give local commuters time to adjust their travel habits and get used to using public transportation.

Since SunRail’s launch in May, the system has understood it’s role in providing a viable alternative during the I-4 construction work. “We have the option to add a third passenger car to the trains, as we did during free service, and as we have during certain peak times during revenue service,” said FDOT spokesman Steve Olson.

And it’s not just about the ride on SunRail, officials also hope that commuters can get used to using transit for the first-mile/last-mile segments of their commutes. To facilitate these non-auto connections, SunRail stations will be offering discounted parking for vanpools and local officials are highlighting the number of bus (both shuttle and transit) and shared-ride options available to local residents – a ready-made solution to I-4 traffic disruptions.

Changing More than Just Commuting Habits

Ridership levels and progress on planned service extensions are certainly good barometers of SunRail’s initial success and acceptance within the community. But as with any passenger rail project, so, too, is the response of the business and real estate community — from both the investing and employer perspective.

Over the summer, the Orlando Business Journal (OBJ) noted about SunRail, “we built it and they are coming.” Here, they asked local business leaders what they thought, thus far, of SunRail. The responses are insightful.

Paul Ellis, President of CNL Commercial Real Estate told the OBJ: “It is a big cultural shift for Orlando. We have four employees SunRail’s Altamonte Springs station serves a local population of more than 40,000.
now who take the train to work. The whole time they’re getting stuff done so when they hit the gates, they’re more refreshed and ready to go.’’

“I think you’re going to begin to see a premium for those office spaces within walking distance of the stations,” said Jeff Sweeney, Senior Director of Office Brokerage Services for Cushman & Wakefield of Florida, Inc., to the OBJ. “That’s a new conversation and parameter.”

A Commitment Best Illustrated by Flexibility

In RAIL Magazine’s initial coverage of SunRail, we speculated that the Orlando Health and Florida Hospital stations would be a key connection for local commuters. Initial ridership from these stations, however, lagged. Turns out that many health care workers at the facilities work a 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., daily shift. SunRail’s last daily train heading north called on the station at 7:22 p.m. and 7:34 p.m., not giving employees enough time. In August, SunRail leaders announced they’d change the schedule – with the last train now leaving the two stations at 7:37 p.m., and 7:49 p.m., respectively.

“We’re giving this a try to see if it meets the needs, and we’ll go from there,” said FDOT’s Olson. “It’s this type of flexibility and responsiveness that surely will make SunRail a continued success.”

CDTLS can provide funding in support of transportation facility construction or renovation. Across the country local transit services are building facilities and promoting economic development through transportation. Sustainable economic development can be dependent on an intermodal transportation system that includes rail or bus. Financing is meant to facilitate or enhance community transportation activities and to promote intermodal activities and mobility.

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Dale J. Marsico, CCTM
1341 G Street, NW, 10th Floor
Washington, DC 20005
Tel: 202.415.9682
Fax: 202.737.9197
E-mail: marsico@ctaa.org
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