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TODAY'S NEWS

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Rail link upgrade vital to keep port competitive, director says

By CATHERINE LACKNER

Port of Miami Director Bill Johnson sought support of Miami's Downtown Development Authority last week for renovations to rail lines that connect the port with points north and west. But authority board members, frustrated by the difficulty of establishing commuter rail service along the corridor and concerned about noise, refused to endorse the project – at least right now.

Mr. Johnson is expected to repeat his pitch next month.

The port, the City of Miami, the Florida Department of Transportation, Florida East Coast Railway and Flagler Development Corp. have joined forces to apply for a grant from the National Infrastructure Investment program to renovate the decades-old tracks, which have been dormant about three years.

The track renovations are key to keeping the port competitive in light of the expansion of the Panama Canal, Mr. Johnson said, and as a bonus would remove trucks from downtown streets, reducing congestion and fuel use.

Several years ago port officials said 8% of port cargo was being carried out by rail.

The port is the county's second-largest economic engine, Mr. Johnson said, serving 4.1 million cruise passengers annually – expected to increase to 6 million by 2020 – and ranking as the 11th-busiest cargo port in the US. Cruise passengers are counted on embarkation and again on debarkation.

"The port is very important," said board member Neisen Kasdin. "and the DDA needs to



Photo by Madine Usdin

Rail line renovations are key to seaport's future and would help remove trucks from downtown streets, says Port Director Bill Johnson.

have a seat at the table if the trains are going through downtown."

"What's the noise factor?" asked board member Hank Klein. "I'm not sure people living downtown want trains running by their expensive condos."

Before the service ceased, primarily because of mechanical problems with a port bridge, trains ran between midnight and 5 a.m., Mr. Johnson said, and there are no immediate plans to change that. In addition, the

project would include "quiet zones" with signals where trains would refrain from sounding horns and would move through crossings within minutes.

"What about commuter rail?" asked authority board chairman and Miami City Commissioner Marc Sarnoff. The authority has supported the concept of Tri-Rail being able to run on Florida East Coast tracks into downtown, rather than passengers having to change trains in Hialeah.

"We're fully exploring that," Mr. Johnson said. "We have to pencil it out, see if it makes sense."

"I think we should say something about using these train tracks for public transportation," said board member Alan Ojeda.

"We could pass a resolution subject to inclusion of that," Mr. Sarnoff said. "In my experience, unless you ask for what you want, your chances of getting it are nil."

But Mr. Johnson reiterated that passenger rail would have to be financially worthwhile before the parties involved would commit to it.

"We haven't taken an in-depth look at this," said Alyce Robertson, authority executive director. "But getting trucks off the streets is a good thing."

It was decided that the authority's Urban Design Committee would study the matter and report back to the full board next month.