

PUBLIC TRANSIT

Road's hard for Tri-Rail as it toils on its fast track

■ Tri-Rail hopes to improve rush-hour service so trains will run once every 20 minutes by 2006. Meanwhile, construction delays are a continual nuisance.

BY MICHAEL HIBBLIN

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Tri-Rail is hoping its \$334 million double-tracking project will lead to improved service and increased ridership. But until construction is complete, the project will sometimes mean some aggravating delays both for Tri-Rail riders and for drivers who need to cross the railroad.

The commuter rail agency reopened the Hollywood Boulevard crossing this week after two weeks of work at the site.

The crossings at Johnson Street and Stirling Road will be closed next year, as will the one at 79th Street in Miami.

Tri-Rail riders also have been affected by the construction. At times over the summer, only 20 to 30 percent of trains were on time. But on-time percentages have since gone back up into the 70s and 80s, Tri-Rail spokeswoman Bonnie Arnold said.

"It's getting better," she said. "We've put new platforms and new pieces of track into service, and actually, last weekend 100 percent of our trains were on time."

The construction project eventually will give Tri-Rail two parallel tracks along the railroad's 72-mile corridor, which runs mainly along Interstate 95 from near West Palm Beach to near Miami International Airport.

When the project is complete in March 2006, the commuter service hopes to run trains every 20 minutes during the morning and afternoon rush, compared with once an hour now. In the world of mass transit, more frequent service is one of the keys to attracting more riders.

Even with this summer's delays, Arnold said Tri-Rail saw a 12 percent increase in ridership during June and July and a 9 percent increase in August.

Tri-Rail averages about 10,500 boardings per day — the equivalent of 5,250 round-trip riders.

Building new track on a working railroad is a complicated job.

"It's been a challenge, to say the least, to be able to maintain passenger and freight traffic on the railroad as well as do our job and get the railroad upgraded and constructed," project manager Thomas LeBeau said.

Up to 200 people have been working on the project, LeBeau said, with some operating track-laying equipment, others building and reconstructing stations or working on the 12 bridges that need to be built.

As the final phase of double tracking continues, Tri-Rail officials also are looking at

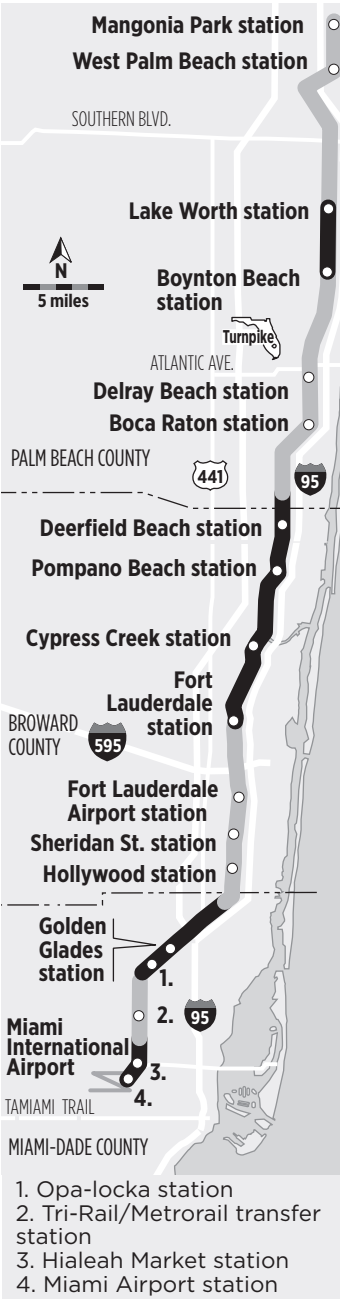
A SECOND TRACK

LEGEND

Second track complete



Planned/under construction



THE HERALD

other possible expansion projects, including passenger rail service alongside the Dolphin Expressway.

The agency also is studying the feasibility of running passenger trains on the Florida East Coast Railway tracks, which, unlike the tracks used by Tri-Rail now, cut through the heart of most downtown areas.

The FEC had no interest in allowing passenger service as Amtrak and later Tri-Rail were first being planned but now is considering the possibility. Local leaders also support the idea as a better way to get people who live and work in densely populated areas out of their vehicles.

But Arnold said none of these projects would start until the double-tracking project is completed in 2006.

In the meantime, passenger Cynthia Bolden of Miami takes the train several times a week and is hopeful the project will lead to more reliable service.

"That's my complaint, the delays," she said, "because sometimes they'll be so late. Late, late. But other than that, it's pretty decent."



EMILY MICHOT/HERALD STAFF

SLOW WORK: Interruptions come often for workers laying new track for Tri-Rail at the Hollywood station.