

# FLORIDA RAIL SYSTEM PLAN

NOVEMBER 2023

## Chapter 6

Coordination and Outreach



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## Chapter 6 Coordination and Outreach

Stakeholder engagement was pivotal in providing input on the role that rail plays in enhancing mobility in Florida – connecting residents with jobs, bringing visitors to vacation destinations, and providing equitable, safe, and sustainable travel options – as well as painting a picture of the current issues and needs. This chapter describes how rail stakeholders and the public were involved in the development and coordination of the Florida Rail System Plan.

### 6.1 Stakeholder Engagement

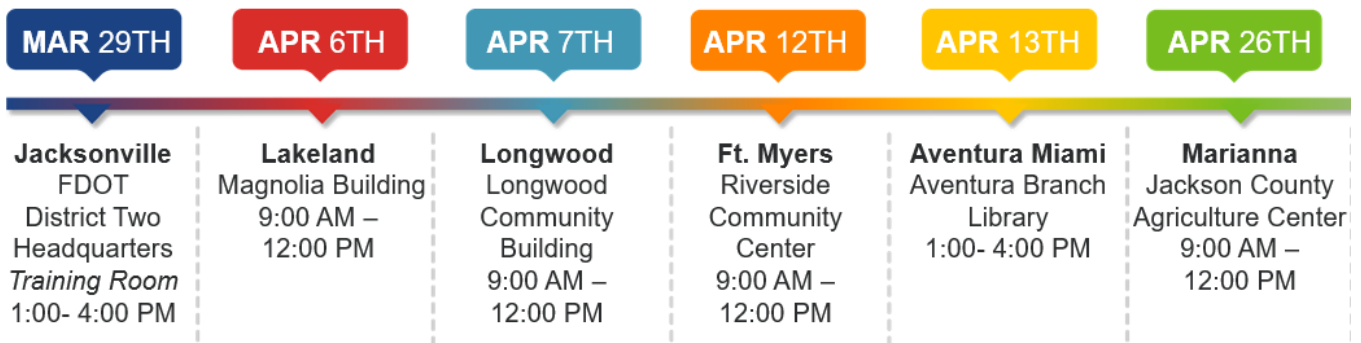
FDOT engaged stakeholders throughout all stages of the plan development. Stakeholders included city, county, and MPO planners and transportation engineers; railroads; business owners; community redevelopment agencies; and the public/daily transportation users. Stakeholder involvement included identification of freight and passenger rail priorities and goals; agency roles and responsibility improvements; location-specific rail improvements; and identification of issues, needs, and potential investments for rail in Florida.

Outreach efforts included hosting a series of online and in-person public meetings, meetings with a Project Advisory Committee, and a comment period with plan stakeholders.

#### 6.1.1 Regional Listening Sessions

Between March 29 and April 26, 2022, a series of Regional Listening Sessions were held around the state to gather input from stakeholders and the public in person. See Figure 6-1. Social media posts, email updates, and a press release promoting the public meetings were published to alert stakeholders and the public about the meetings and FDOT’s desire to receive their feedback.

Figure 6-1 | Regional Listening Sessions Timeline



Source: FDOT, 2022

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The purpose of this series was to:

- Gather input on our current rail systems and how they should function as part of a better integrated, statewide, and regional transportation system in the future
- Gather input on who does what – both roles and responsibilities of FDOT, its partners, and local agencies
- Strengthen collaboration to better advance cohesive rail priorities

Each session began with opening remarks from District Leadership and/or FDOT's Assistant Secretary of Strategic Development to set the stage. Opening remarks were followed by an overview presentation by FDOT's Rail Office and Transit Office staff to give participants context on how rail and transit are integrated into various statewide plans and strategies at the FDOT, and to share a few draft strategy topics being considered so far. Throughout this presentation, there were opportunities to provide feedback via polling during the presentation.

Through live polling, participants were asked:

- Who are you representing?
- How often do you use transit?
- What would encourage you to use transit?
- How often do you use passenger rail?
- What would encourage you to use passenger rail?
- Which of the following is your top freight rail priority?

After the presentation and live-polling, participants were directed to share their feedback at a series of stations dedicated to transit, passenger rail, and freight rail. See Figure 6-2 for an example. At each station, Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) from the hosting District gave a high level-overview of the region and mode and provided instructions. Participants were shown statewide and regional maps of the mode, and asked to:

- Place a red dot where there is a safety concern
- Place a green dot where facilities are needed (stations, multimodal centers, etc.)
- Draw where a new route is needed with a marker

Participants were also instructed to place general questions or comments on a large blank board using sticky notes. After 15-20 minutes, participants switched to the next station until they had been to all three modal stations.

Figure 6-2 | Transit Station Set-Up at the Lakeland Regional Listening Session



Source: FDOT, 2022

Another short presentation was provided on the current roles and responsibilities for how rail and transit projects get implemented. Participants were asked how these roles and responsibilities should change in the future in a discussion format, where the microphone was passed around for those willing to share their thoughts. Notes were taken to capture feedback, and summarized content was debriefed by the SMEs. Participants were provided with email contact information in case they wanted to send additional feedback to later.

Detailed notes from the meetings, broken into passenger and freight rail responses, can be found in Appendix H.

Additionally, a virtual kick-off meeting was held prior to the in-person sessions on March 21, 2022 for those who would not be able to attend in person. Another virtual webinar was held on June 16, 2022 as a closing of the series, to recap what FDOT gleaned from the Regional Listening Sessions and to validate the content.

### 6.1.2 Florida State Rail Plan Web Page

To provide a medium for public review, the draft Rail System Plan was posted on the FDOT website, located at <https://www.fdot.gov/rail/plans/railplan>.

### 6.1.3 Coordination with Neighboring States

FDOT routinely interacts with neighboring states through involvement in national and regional transportation organizations, such as the Southern Rail Commission and the Southeast Corridor Commission, and to address specific transportation issues as necessary.

FDOT has been working with FRA and other states in the Southeast Rail Commission to ensure that the region's rail perspectives and issues are adequately addressed within the national rail planning process. Also, FDOT is an active member of the Southeast Corridor Commission, which has been working with FRA to develop the Southeast Regional Rail Plan to provide a

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blueprint for establishing high-performance intercity passenger rail throughout the Southeast U.S.

Rail coordinators in all neighboring states were provided an opportunity to review the draft Rail System Plan.

### 6.1.4 Public and Stakeholder Written Comments

FDOT received several comments by email and comment form during the plan's development. Comments were provided by members of the public, railroads, adjacent state DOTs, and public transportation planners, among others. A comment period was open for the plan during the final stages of review for an opportunity to provide further input.

## 6.2 Input Received from the Stakeholder Engagement Process

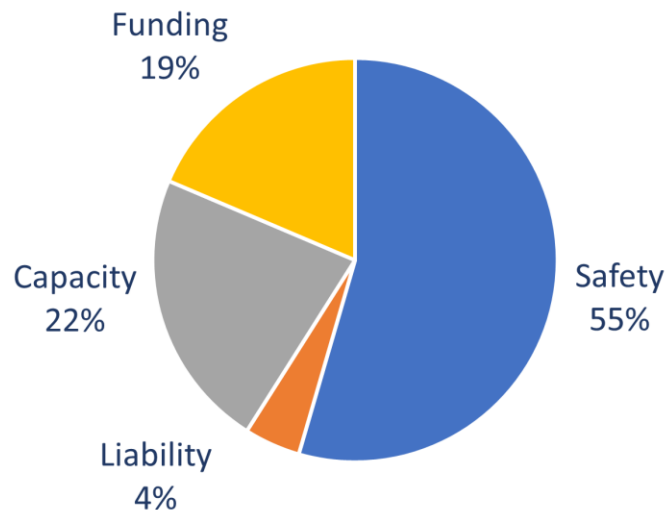
Information gathered from stakeholder engagement was used to develop several components of the Rail Plan. Feedback was utilized to develop goals and objectives; identify infrastructure, operational, and regulatory issues; and to ascertain stakeholders' views on the effectiveness of the state's current involvement in rail planning and oversight as well as strategic roles the state could play in the future to address existing needs.

The content captured from the Listening Sessions was expansive, and in some cases, regionally specific. The content was summarized to create a high-level understanding of passenger and freight rail needs and validated by polling at the Closing Webinar.

### 6.2.1 Freight Rail Needs Summary

The top freight rail priority for the participants at the Regional Listening Sessions was safety (55%), followed by capacity (22%) and funding (19%). See Figure 3 for a breakdown all freight rail priorities.

Figure 6-3 | Regional Listening Session Survey of Freight Rail Priorities



Source: FDOT, 2022

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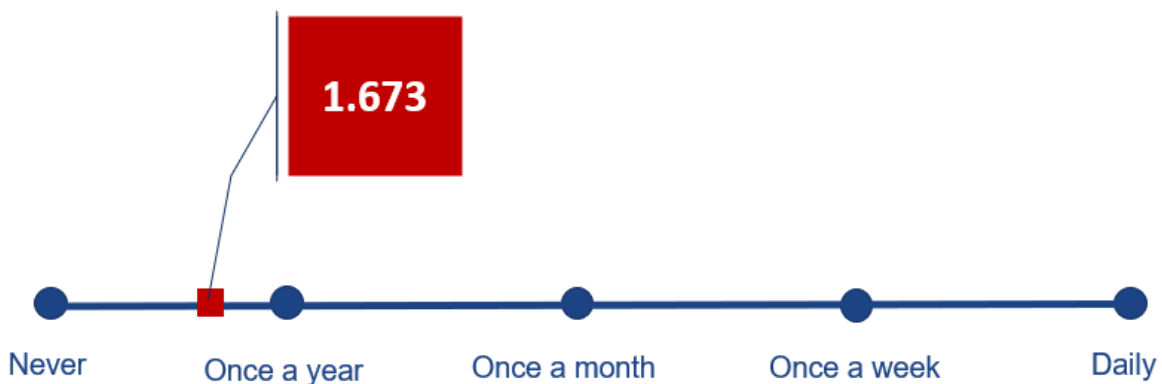
The main needs captured were:

- **Capacity/Corridors** - Capacity and connections for freight rail, whether through re-imagining shared tracks or dedicated freight corridors.
- **Modal Shift** - Modal shift from truck to rail to ease highway congestion, reduce carbon footprint, and help solve the truck parking issue.
- **Maintenance Needs** - Maintenance and retention of existing corridors around the state.
- **Intermodal Facilities** - Inland ports and inland port funding opportunities.
- **Business Needs** - More Class I railroads in Florida's market.
- **Safety Around Railroad Tracks** - Elimination of rail/roadway conflicts through highway-rail grade crossing reduction/separation and encouraging safe behavior around tracks.
- **Coordination/Relationships** - Coordination between FDOT, freight railroads, ports, intercity passenger and commuter railroads, and local jurisdictions.
- **FDOT's Role** - Expansion of FDOT's role in supporting the use and improvement of freight rail transportation.

### 6.2.2 Passenger Rail Needs Summary

Participants were asked how often they use passenger rail, on a sliding scale from 1-5, with 1 being "Never" and 5 being "Daily." See Figure 6-4. The average answer was 1.7, representing that participants generally use passenger rail between never and once a year.

Figure 6-4 | Passenger Rail Needs Sliding Scale, Average Response

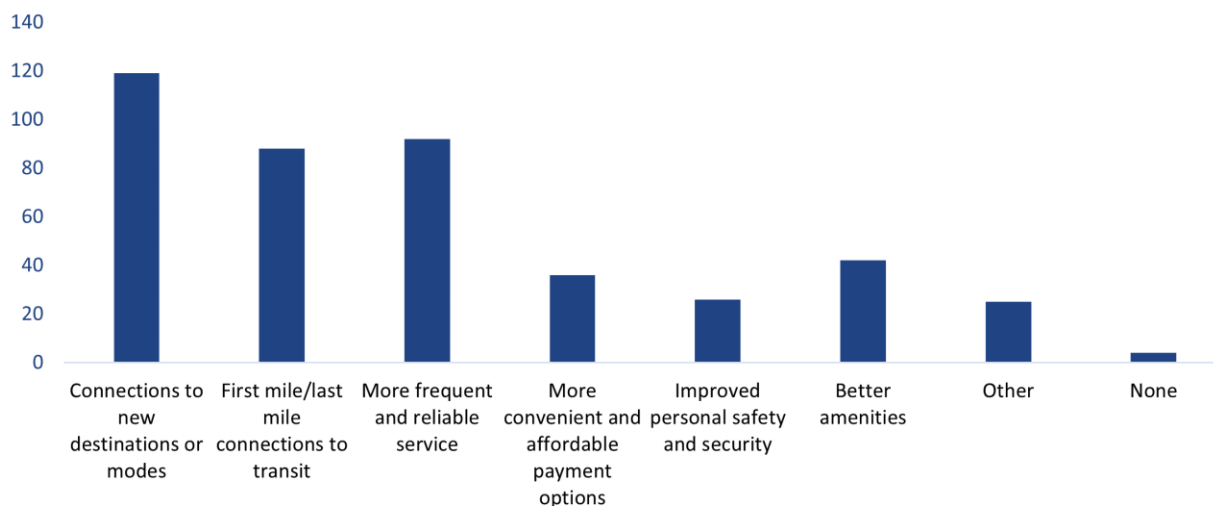


Source: FDOT, 2022

Participants were then asked what would encourage them to use passenger rail. The top three selections were connections to new destinations, to new modes, and more frequent and reliable service. See Figure 6-5 for a breakdown of each priority.

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Figure 6-5 | Regional Listening Session Survey of Passenger Rail Priorities



Source: FDOT, 2022

The main needs captured were:

- **Connectivity** - New routes, regional hubs, connections to other modes, and first/last mile connections.
- **More Departures** - Increased frequencies and extended service hours.
- **Accessibility** - Accessibility and convenience for all user groups, with the help of technology.
- **Corridor Preservation** - Dedicated rail infrastructure within existing highway/utility corridors.
- **Awareness** - Civic engagement through outreach and marketing.
- **Safety** - Increased safety for riders and roadway users who interact with railroad tracks.
- **Partnership** - Increased coordination between FDOT, the railroads, and local jurisdictions.
- **Funding** - A reimagined use of transportation funds and additional funding opportunities.

### 6.3 Consideration of Recommendations Identified During the Rail Plan Process

The comments and recommendations received through the Florida State Rail Plan public outreach process have been consolidated into recommended actions for FDOT.

#### 6.3.1 State Rail Planning Coordination

While the FDOT Freight & Rail Office has the primary responsibility for rail planning and policy within FDOT and administers various federal and state rail-related programs, some aspects of rail planning occur within a number of other offices within FDOT. During the creation of the plan, Project Advisory Committee (PAC) meetings were held several times among FDOT offices to



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engage representatives for FDOT awareness and provide project oversight. The PAC helped guide the Rail System Plan's vision, goals, and objectives, as well as rail needs and projects. Effective and continued coordination between these offices is necessary to maximize efficiency and eliminate redundancies.

At the local level, FDOT and local staff work with the state's Regional Planning Councils and Metropolitan Planning Organizations to coordinate planning and development efforts regarding rail transportation. Many of these agencies participated in the Rail System Plan development process and had the opportunity to provide further input through review and comment on the draft Rail System Plan.

Other state agencies with rail planning responsibilities include the South Florida Regional Transportation Commission, the operator of the Tri-Rail commuter rail service; and the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity, which administers the Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI) and leads and coordinates the efforts of state and regional agencies in assisting rural communities.



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