

## Brightline to Disney World? Rail operator plans extension to Orlando, plus South Florida commuter line

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*Since 2017 up until early 2022, Brightline has been involved in 46 fatalities along its tracks. Since the restart of the service after a pandemic break, elected officials and regulators are now gearing up to address the problem. BY AL DIAZ*

Brightline got its start four years ago running passengers on a high-speed rail line between three stations in Miami, Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach.

The for-profit rail operator owned by private equity group Fortress, a subsidiary of global conglomerate SoftBank, now has multiple expansion efforts underway, in the Miami area and beyond. This week, Brightline began testing trains without passengers to Cocoa Beach as construction of the railroad tracks to Orlando near completion.

New train stations are set to open later this year — the first since Brightline started South Florida passenger service in 2018. The new depots would open on the heels of a nearly 20-month shutdown during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Brightline stopped train service in March 2020 and resumed operations in November 2021.

Passenger levels remain below pre-pandemic highs, with 61,000 passengers riding in November, compared to a monthly average of 100,000 in the months before the company suspended service. A one-way train ticket from West Palm to Miami now ranges from \$15 to \$22 for standard service, depending on the time of the day. Last month, the same one-way ticket was \$15 throughout the day.

Although the latest ridership figures are a decline from the monthly average, Brightline officials expect upward momentum as rail line extensions get closer, telling investors the recent 50,000 new passenger accounts for purchasing tickets exceeded projections.

Here's a look at the planned rail extension efforts:

**Brightline station at PortMiami:**

Miami-Dade County commissioners in 2019 approved a resolution asking administrators to negotiate a deal to connect the port's cruise terminals with Brightline's Miami station. The tracks Brightline uses already connect to freight facilities at the port. Miami-Dade hasn't approved an agreement to let the passenger service begin.

**Brightline station in Aventura:**

A new taxpayer-funded station is set to open this fall — the result of a 2019 agreement between Brightline and Miami-Dade County to have a train stop at Aventura Mall, one of the busiest shopping destinations in Florida.

The county is paying \$76 million for the station under construction near the mall, which will connect with a pedestrian bridge over Biscayne Boulevard.

**Commuter stations in Miami-Dade and Broward:**

While Brightline prepares to open new stations for its higher-speed express trains, the company also is trying to launch a new commuter-rail service. Modeled after Tri-Rail, the new service would bring commuter trains to different neighborhoods throughout the Miami and Fort Lauderdale areas.

Talks for a Coastal Link railway are underway in both counties. Tri-Rail wants to be the operator of the line, an arrangement that would have Miami-Dade and Broward paying Brightline for access to the company's rights for passenger service on the tracks.

The commuter trains probably wouldn't look like the existing Brightline railcars, and could be modeled after the double-decker trains Tri-Rail operates for its 18 stops between Palm Beach County's Mangonia Park and Miami International Airport.

**Brightline station in Boca Raton:**

In Palm Beach County, Boca Raton is building a new station for Brightline. A groundbreaking ceremony is slated for Monday, with completion expected in the second half of 2022.

**Brightline leg to the Orlando area:**

In a Dec. 29 update to investors, Brightline said construction of its Orlando route was 70% complete, and that it was aiming for "substantial completion" of its station at the Orlando International Airport by the end of the year. It's part of Brightline's planned rail service area north of Palm Beach County that the company hopes to start selling tickets for in early 2023.

**Brightline to Disney World:**

Brightline has an agreement to build a station at Disney Springs, the shopping and entertainment complex near Disney World. Brightline expects a rail link to Florida's most popular theme park eventually to be a magnet to draw passengers.

**Brightline service to Tampa:**

Brightline told investors it expects talks with state officials on getting access to extend tracks along the Interstate 4 corridor for a new train route connecting Florida's two coasts to wrap up in the spring. Many hurdles and approvals remain. Rail service isn't expected on the route until at least 2028.



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