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## NEW RAIL SERVICE ENHANCES MULTIMODAL CONNECTIVITY AT ORLANDO INT’L

by Jodi Richards | Jun 20, 2024 | Passenger Transport



A long-time regional transportation plan became reality when Orlando and Miami were connected with high-speed rail service. The new route provides an attractive new option for airline travelers throughout the state, and Orlando International (MCO) staked its claim as the first U.S. airport with high-speed intercity passenger rail service adjacent to the terminal.

Last September, a long-time regional transportation plan became reality when Orlando and Miami were connected with high-speed rail service. The new route provides an attractive new option for airline travelers throughout the state, and Orlando International (MCO) staked its claim as the first U.S. airport with high-speed intercity passenger rail service adjacent to the terminal.



The Greater Orlando Aviation Authority is committed to being a global leader in the evolution of mobility, says Chief Executive Officer Kevin Thibault. “The airport has always envisioned to be the mobile hub.” The introduction of Brightline service at MCO affirms that vision.

A regional rail connection was long considered to be a crucial component for the central Florida airport but was not written into guiding documents until about 1977. At that point, it was described as a “possible future fixed-track mass transit system.” Throughout the ensuing years, MCO leadership and the Florida Department of Transportation analyzed various iterations of what a rail connection might look like both for the airport and the state. “It wasn’t until 2010 that the concept we have today really got fleshed out,” explains Thibault.

In June 2012, a memorandum of understanding was created to officially define the potential rail corridor, airport station, an associated maintenance facility, and the roles/responsibilities of major stakeholders. Outlining the infrastructure required to bring a train line into the airport was a key aspect. For example, roadways needed to be moved and a series of bridges had to be built. In addition, a city-owned wastewater treatment facility was located near the site identified for the train maintenance facility. The memorandum encouraged close coordination among all parties to prevent potential conflict.

Given the complexity of the project, it’s no wonder MCO’s rail connection took decades to materialize. Thibault urges other airport leaders not to give up on similar efforts. “We persevered,” he notes. “We had a vision and it became reality.” Partnerships among airport leadership, local government, state government and the private sector played a critical role in moving the sizable project forward, he adds.

The financial implications are commensurately large. According to Brightline, the \$6 billion multimodal transportation project is responsible for creating 10,000 jobs and approximately \$6.4 billion in direct economic impact to the



facts&figures

**Project:** Train Station/Multimodal Facility

**Location:** Orlando Int'l Airport, in FL

**Purpose:** Enhancing statewide connectivity

**Recent Addition:** High-speed passenger train service between Orlando & Miami

**Key Asset:** Multimodal facility adjacent to Terminal C

**Size:** 1.3 million sq. ft.

**Stations For:** Terminal Link airport people mover; Brightline intercity rail; ground transportation options (taxis, shuttle



region. Construction of the airport train station cost \$200 million. Because of the long-term statewide benefits, the Florida DOT and Greater Orlando Aviation Authority shared the cost 75%/25%, respectively.

### **Logical Location, Long Timeline**

Orlando's central location within Florida and MCO's expansive 12,000-acre footprint made them attractive candidates for a multimodal hub to serve the region and state. "It was logical to have that mobile connection here at the airport," says Thibault.

"As the airport continued to grow, we knew we couldn't accommodate it [a train station] in the existing terminals that we had," he adds. As envisioned, growth shifted to the South Complex, and the train station was slated for development there. For decades, the airport's Master Plan included infrastructure improvements to help prepare for the future train station. Projects such as filling in ponds and rerouting the airport's master drainage system were completed gradually over the years as specific capacity triggers were met.

In the early 2000s, an elevated structure for the people mover that now connects the terminal and train station was constructed on the midfield taxiway. Later, when MCO was ready to move ahead with the people mover project, the infrastructure was already in place. "All we had to do is overlay on top of that structure," Thibault relates. "It was really beneficial for us to have that already done."

Preliminary earthwork was also completed in the same early timeframe. "All those things that were done helped facilitate the efficient development of the train station at that location," Thibault says.

Construction of the train station started in 2015. Because the location was largely a greenfield site work on the new facility did not disrupt operations at the airport or on surrounding roadways. "That was a benefit for them to get the construction done in a timely manner," he adds.

services, public buses, etc.); future SunRail commuter rail

**Cost:** \$200 million

**Funding:** 75% Florida Dept. of Transportation; 25% airport

**Constructed:** 2015-2017

### **Brightline Station**

**Size:** 3 stories, with 72,000-square-foot platform & 37,350-square-foot interior space

**Features:** 4 self-service check-in counters; security screening area; large skylight; information booth & ambassadors to assist customers

**Construction:** Jan. 2022-April 2023

**Designer/Architect:** Bigtime Design Studios

**Architect of Record:** Sonny Fornoles of Borrellil + Partner

**Construction:** Gomez Construction



The MCO Train Station, which opened in November 2017, has approximately 1.3 million square feet of space on three levels. It currently accommodates Terminal Link (the airport's people mover train), SunRail commuter rail and the recently added Brightline intercity rail. There is also room for a possible rail system serving the International Drive/Convention Center area.

The new station was designed and built to improve customer flow among multiple modes of transportation and the airport's Terminal C, which opened in September 2022. Terminals A and B are accessed via the people mover. The station also supports ground transportation including taxis, shuttle buses and public bus operations, and is connected to MCO's parking garage C.

"We really fixated on making sure that when we built the train station, we built it for all the different rail modes that could come in and out of it," Thibault says. Food, beverage and retail concessions are not currently included, but might be added in the future. "We didn't roll it out initially because we wanted to see the passenger mix that we get from the Brightline customer."

The station for MCO's Terminal Link automated people mover is a 200,000-square-foot facility that connects passengers between terminals A and B and the Hyatt Regency Orlando International Airport. The station in terminals A and B is located on Level 3, between the security checkpoint for Gates 70 to 129 and the Terminal B check-in counters. The four-minute ride includes views of the airfield, gates 70 to 99 and the air traffic control tower.

SunRail operates a 49-mile commuter system with 16 stations throughout Volusia, Seminole, Orange and Osceola counties, with a bus link to MCO. Thibault notes that future plans include a direct rail link to MCO, but nothing has been formalized. "Preliminary evaluations show that it would significantly improve the overall ridership of the commuter rail line if that connectivity were to occur," he explains.

Operated by Brightline, the new higher-speed rail route between Central and South Florida has daily roundtrips between Miami and Orlando, with stops in Aventura, Fort Lauderdale, Boca Raton and West Palm Beach, but MCO is its only direct airport stop. Founded in 2017, Brightline offers travelers a "guest-first experience designed to reinvent train travel and take cars off the road." Connecting Miami and Orlando "fulfills our ultimate business model," Brightline President Patrick Goddard has stated.

Not surprisingly, regional business and tourism industries are enthusiastic about the expansion and service.

"Passengers are consistently saying they're excited that it provides that connectivity," Thibault notes.



Brightline launched operations in South Florida in 2018, connecting Miami, Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach. Stations in Boca Raton and Aventura opened in 2022. The new route between Miami and Orlando covers 235 miles and takes riders three to three-and-a-half hours, depending on South Florida station stops.



The Orlando expansion involved 56 bridges (38 existing, 18 new), three underpasses, drainage installations, signal installations and 60 miles of new track. Over the four years of construction, upgrades and improvements were made to three underpasses and 156 railroad crossings. Engineers also had to create double tracks under active airport taxiways and tug roads and a new 35-mile rail alignment along the Beachline Expressway/state road 528.

The Brightline station at MCO is three stories tall with a 72,000-square-foot platform, making it the largest in the company's entire system. Inside, the 37,350-square-foot space includes four self-service check-in counters and a security screening area. Information booth staff and ambassadors help direct and assist travelers. "We want to make sure the train station is an extension of the overall 'Orlando Experience'—an elevated passenger experience," Thibault emphasizes. "An expansive skylight allows sunlight to pervade the area, reminding travelers they are, indeed, in the Sunshine State."

Designed by **Bigtime** Design Studios, Brightline stations are "meticulously built through the lens of today's traveler," the company says.

The airport partnered with Synect to promote the new rail service and integrate its schedule into MCO's existing network of more than 2,000 connected displays. The team developed custom visual content to greet, guide



and assist rail passengers throughout the airport. In addition to providing color-coded schedule information via its flagship Passenger360® product, Synect integrated visual cues into wayfinding signs, including animated icons such as trains and arrows that guide passengers to the new station. The company's ReadySeeGo® portable totems provide guidance in areas that lack permanent infrastructure or are under construction.

“The Greater Orlando Aviation Authority continues to excel in offering innovative services and facilities to passengers,” says Yahav Ran, founder and chief executive officer of Synect. “We are thrilled to support these enhancements with our flexible, engaging and fun visual solutions.”

Riders have two fare options. SMART service includes complimentary Wi-Fi, multiple power/USB outlets and food/beverages available for purchase. Brightline likens it to a business class ticket from an airline. PREMIUM is more of a first-class experience with added amenities including a dedicated lounge, priority boarding, checked luggage and complimentary snacks and beverages.

A \$100 million maintenance and storage facility is located on 62 acres at the southwest corner of MCO's property. Commonly referred to as Basecamp, the 138,000-square-foot facility provides much-needed space for service work (up to 16 trains daily) and storage of the rail company's vehicles. It includes a fully automated 12,275-square-foot train wash, an 80,000-gallon biodiesel fuel farm and maintenance and storage tracks that are longer than two football fields. Basecamp operates 24/7, with areas for engineers, conductors, technicians and inspectors.

The Brightline trains were produced in partnership with Siemens Mobility. The stainless-steel coaches include special ergonomic seating, contemporary communication systems and enhanced Wi-Fi.

### **Aviation Remains the Focus**

Thibault emphasizes that even as the Greater Orlando Aviation Authority worked on adding more rail service, it never lost sight of its primary goals at MCO.

“As we continue to grow as a community, and as a region, we have a unique opportunity to leverage our assets and provide a premium transportation network while also remain true to our mission, which is to seamlessly connect Florida and the world through exceptional experiences, collaboration and creativity for our nearly 60 million passengers,” he concludes.



### **AUTHOR**



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