

## TRANSPORTATION

# Brightline reveals new timeline, details for Tampa connection

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High-speed rail company Brightline has pushed back the starting date of its Tampa connection to Orlando as it prepares to make a Disney station more of a priority.

Brightline is in the process of finalizing the conceptual design for the Orlando to Tampa route. The plan now is to start the work in 2022 rather than 2021 for the route and station buildout. The construction would take three years, making 2025 the completion date for the Tampa connection.

The timeline change was revealed during a recent meeting in Central Florida, when Michael Cegelis, Brightline's executive vice president of rail infrastructure, said the Miami-based train company would seek an agreement with the Central Florida Commuter Rail Commission, which oversees commuter rail SunRail, to study potential joint operations on portions of the Tampa extension and available rail corridors.

When the Tampa connection and station come to fruition, it will create a massive economic impact and Tampa would finally have rail as mass transit — a mode of transit Tampa Bay business leaders have long championed.

Brightline's rail system from Orlando to Tampa would create thousands of jobs, \$3.7 billion in GDP impact and \$787 million in federal, state and local tax revenue over the first 10 years, according to public documents.

If the agreement with SunRail is approved, Brightline's train would travel from Orlando International Airport using an Orlando Utilities Commission rail spur, existing SunRail tracks and then travel on State Road 417 to the Disney World area. It would use Interstate 4 to connect to Tampa.

"We plan to have a station at the Disney World area and then extend from Disney World directly to Tampa," Cegelis said.

The stop at Disney taking priority over Tampa is one of many factors creating unknowns for this region's leg of the project.

Brightline's right-of-way lease with the Florida Department of Transportation and Central Florida Expressway Authority two use Interstate 4 envelope for rail has been on hold since March due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Also, a Tampa station has not been formally identified. However, Brightline has entered early negotiations with Tampa developer Darryl Shaw to build a station in the Ybor City area. The agreement allows Brightline to proceed with an environmental analysis, which must be completed before a Tampa station could move forward.

Potential stations include a 14-acre site that was previously targeted for a Tampa Bay Rays stadium, the GasWorx site and Tampa Park Apartments.

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