

Guest Editorial: Whatever its name, train stinks

All Aboard Florida, Brightline, Virgin Trains. The name may constantly change – I'll just refer to it as "the train" – but the basic fact remains. The company is still desperately seeking financing. Despite claims to the contrary, the train is NOT a done deal.

The week of Nov. 19 was bittersweet for those of us who have been battling this train for nearly five years. The sweet: Indian River County voted to reject the settlement that would have made them agree to no longer represent their constituents on this issue. The bitter: Martin County voted 4-1 (Commissioner Sarah Heard the lone dissenter) to approve the settlement.

During Florida NOT All Aboard's consistent opposition, the train has undergone many changes. Fortress Investment Group, the original founding force behind All Aboard Florida, was delisted and purchased in 2017 by SoftBank, a Japanese multinational holding conglomerate headquartered in Tokyo. That same year the freight division, FECR, was sold to Grupo Mexico, the largest mining corporation in Mexico. Ferrocarril Mexicano, the company's rail transport division, operates the nation's largest rail fleet. Now the passenger train is owned by the Japanese company

SoftBank, and Grupo Mexico owns the land, tracks, and freight division.

The Martin County vote sets a dangerous precedent. It demonstrated that a foreign-owned entity could control and silence our local government. Our county commissioners essentially agreed to no longer represent us on this issue for a period of build-out, PLUS five years beyond their start-up.

Should the train come through here, our commission has willingly agreed to be legally silenced regardless of what unexpected, yet-to-be-known adverse effects may occur. How can our commissioners protect the health, safety, and welfare of our community if they cannot speak, lobby, review the improvements, etc.? Even new commissioners elected in two years will be silenced by this agreement.

I cannot put a price tag on silencing our representatives, but the train found one.

Now is not the time to cave in and give up the fight. We have many residents and businesses west of the train bridge who receive zero benefits from this agreement. Being open only 15 minutes per hour will be a debacle during peak boating hours. The train may or may not add more clearance to the bridge. They are not raising the bridge, merely adding more clearance by recon-

figuring the bottom side of the bridge IF it allows for 35% more boat traffic.

Boaters, you know how low that bridge is; don't count on much help with this iffy concession.

Time will tell the real cost of the BOCC's decision. I believe what the BOCC conceded is far more costly to our community than what was promised by the train, which provided no financial guarantee of actually being able to provide those benefits.

It has been reported the train lost over \$56 million in the first two quarters of this year. The BOCC's perceived savings in ending the lawsuit by signing this settlement may be one of the costliest decisions ever made by the Martin County Board of Commissioners.

Why must we continue the fight? Why is it not a done deal? Let me review.

Initially planned to start operations between Miami and Orlando in 2014, the train still is not traversing the Treasure Coast in 2019. Financially, the train always has been and still is scrambling for financing. The train applied for, but did not receive, a \$1.5+ billion federal Railroad Rehabilitation and Improvement Financing loan. Strike one.

The train then applied for and received state approval to issue and sell

Private Activity Bonds (PABs). After numerous offerings, the West Palm Beach to Orlando segment bonds still have no buyers, despite the enticing tax savings. Strike two.

Now, the train is applying for authorization to issue an IPO, but the amount of projected sales falls far short of the needed capital. How many strikes can the train take? Time will tell.

We must continue our fight – even without our own commissioners. Florida NOT All Aboard, Indian River County, residents, and state and federal legislators have not given up. We must support our elected officials who are fighting for us and remember them at election time. I believe that together we CAN protect our communities. Don't give up now because a few have thrown in the towel. We can do this!

We will not go quietly into the night as our commissioners did over a holiday weekend. Follow Florida NOT All Aboard on Facebook and visit floridano-tallboard.com for information on an upcoming event, Jan. 19, because FNAA wants to hear from you. ■

– K.C. Ingram, founder of Florida NOT All Aboard

Guest Column: Funding supports early learning

The state's Office of Early Learning introduced the Performance Funding Project in 2014 to ensure quality early learning experiences for the state's youngest children. The initiative is the result of a growing awareness of brain development and recognition that the first five years are the most critical in determining a child's future potential.

As the program's name suggests, the OEL increases funding opportunities to learning centers contracted with local Early Learning Coalitions that meet its stringent guidelines, professional development and can demonstrate improvements in quality.

At a time that funding for social/educational programs is uncertain, I feel it's important as the director/owner of a Stuart-based early learning center that taxpayers should be aware of this important program and what's required of providers, parents, and the Early Learning Coalitions charged with implementation, and its real impact on child education.

The first year my center was chosen to participate, my teachers/instructors were enrolled in required online classes. They had to participate. The professional Program Quality staff at the ELC of Indian River, Martin and Okeechobee counties provided technical assistance for the classroom instructors on site and taught workshops showing optimum in-



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teractions with children, tools and classroom set-ups, and projects to enhance learning at the youngest ages.

The classes and workshops were a wonderful experience for the instructors. They learned a great deal over the six months' of instruction.

But the program does not end with classes and workshop participation. The ELC staff assesses teachers' progress through the Performance Funding Project's Classroom Assessment Scoring System Tool that measures the interaction between the center's instructors and their children. An initial assessment of the individual instructor interacting with his or her classroom is taken to establish a baseline; then another assessment is taken after 20 hours of classroom coaching sessions.

Certified coaches are in the classroom with the instructors and the children, providing one-on-one mentoring for the teachers each week, after which the coach and the instructor meet privately to discuss challenges and oppor-

tunities to improve. A final assessment is made to show progress and to qualify the center for stipends for taking the steps to improve its quality.

Each year that my center has contracted with OEL for the Performance Funding Project, our instructors' scores have increased, improving the quality and interactions with our children in 10 different "dimensions," including Language Modeling and Quality of Feedback that judges the back-and-forth exchanges, the persistence by the teacher and follow-up questions for children to explain their thinking and rationale for their responses and actions. Language Modeling promotes frequent conversations with children, peer conversations, open-ended questions requiring more than one-word responses, etc.

This is a program that works. Learning center instructors/directors are making huge strides in all the domains with technical assistance from the Early Learning Coalition staff, who work regularly with parents and providers daily. In addition to providing technical assistance, they also offer training to instructors to expand their education and give guidance to parents to help them achieve their goals.

The relationship between my center and ELC is unbelievable. All of the ELC staff are willing to help our center and

answer parents' questions. In addition, the Coalition's partnerships assist providers by providing books to our children during the holidays and sending a dental hygienist to our classrooms for dental screenings, who applies fluoride and provides a report for the family dentist. I am very happy to be a contract provider with ELC of IRMO and St. Lucie County for the past 15 years.

A special note of appreciation from our center goes to Sheila Ettehadih, Quality Specialist from the ELC of IRMO, who monitors and coaches our instructors. Whenever we have any questions concerning the Performance Funding Project, Mrs. Ettehadih is always available to us. Communication among centers, agencies and parents working together to educate our students is an invaluable achievement.

With this in mind, centers should not shy away from accepting and enrolling in Performance Funding Projects in the future. Our center will continue to participate and try to enrich our students with the tools they need to succeed. ■

Lisa Juliano, Director/Owner of Pebblestone Academy Inc. in Stuart, is contracted with The Early Learning Coalition of Indian River, Okeechobee and Martin counties and the ELC of St. Lucie County.