

ADMIRALTY COMMITTEE

ALL ABOARD FLORIDA WILL SHUT DOWN THE OKEECHOBEE WATERWAY, FLORIDA'S PANAMA CANAL

It is not just a little problem of impatient “yachties” waiting. The St. Lucie River is not just another Florida river. It stands apart from the New River and Loxahatchee River and Miami River because it is not merely a vessel thoroughfare through some county roads. It is the equivalent of the Panama Canal for vessels transiting via the Okeechobee Waterway from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico. Just as the Panama Canal is the only way to get from the Atlantic to the Pacific without going around notorious Cape Horn, the Okeechobee Waterway is the only way for vessels to transit from the Gulf of Mexico to the Atlantic Ocean without going south around the Florida Keys (for shallow-draft vessels) or Key West (for deep-draft vessels).



The railroad trestle across the St. Lucie River in Stuart is the motor vehicle equivalent of a traffic bottleneck closing Interstate 95, possibly for the majority of each daylight hour, considering All Aboard Florida plans of 32 transits per day, with most, if not all, during daylight hours. In its closed position, the trestle allows passage of boats that require clearance of less than of 6.2 feet, only the tiniest of boats. The trestle is not just another modern drawbridge. It is an ancient 100-year-old mechanism that opens and closes with the speed of a backward-facing turtle. It thus requires closures commencing well in advance of any approaching train, with sufficient advance time to alert and allow slow commercial barge traffic to complete passage prior to commencing its downward path. The Environmental Impact Statement says a closure cycle takes 15 minutes. That is not what I and others have measured, from red light to green light to coordination with opening the old Roosevelt vehicle bridge a few feet to the west of the trestle. Every time I have passaged the trestle, it takes 30 minutes to complete an open-and-close cycle, measured from the time the trestle red light heralds an approaching train, when vessels must halt their approach and when the old Roosevelt bridge tender will no longer open on request, including the time when the train passes sufficiently far to permit commencement of the closing process, to the time the green light once again allows passage of vessels and the old Roosevelt Bridge tender will once again open on request “after vehicle traffic clears.”

The plan is for 32 All Aboard Florida mostly daylight-traveling trains. Add that to the current 22 freight trains. Even assuming all the freight trains travel at night (which they do not), at 30 minutes per event, that is 16 hours when boat traffic cannot passage! That is more daylight hours than there are in December. That effectively closes down Florida’s Panama Canal completely to the thousands of vessels that pass through the St. Lucie Lock on their passage from the Gulf of Mexico to the Atlantic Ocean. Those vessels include the new yachts that manufacturers bring to and from the boat shows in Miami, Ft. Lauderdale, St. Pete, Newport and beyond; the many commercial barges; the yachts of cruisers and snowbirds headed home or to the Bahamas or to the Gulf on their way to Mexico, Texas and other states north and west, as well as the many casual recreational local boaters who live on the west side of the trestle.

It is not just about impatient yachties having to wait. The Okeechobee Waterway is a lifeline for Florida vessels transiting between the Gulf and the Atlantic, a lifeline that All Aboard Florida threatens to choke to its waterway death.

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Note: All my maritime articles are available on my website www.barbcooklaw.com