

Could Breeze, Three Corners, Stuart factors attract Brightline to Vero Beach?



On Inauguration Day, I received an interesting email from a local developer-Realtor who has done some impressive work on the Treasure Coast.

“Nice article” (on the three corners Vero Beach owns at Indian River Boulevard and 17th Street), began the email from Keith Kite, a longtime Indian River County resident who opened its first Marriott property, a SpringHill Suites on Indian River Boulevard, in 2009, and its first Hilton, a Hampton Inn at a central spot on Miracle Mile in 2015.

“With Big Blue coming and the success of Breeze, it may be time to move the Brightline station to Vero Beach!” Kite continued, suggesting I bring up his trial balloon. “The city could ask Brightline to take a look!”

The same Vero Beach that had has told the higher-speed rail line multiple times it wasn’t interested in a station?

Kite IDs potential locations for Brightline station

The same Vero Beach, whose county commissioners spent \$3.8 million fighting Brightline’s efforts to exist and sell bonds using the state of Florida? Then, in 2021, when that litigation was settled with Brightline, made no agreement to build a station in the county.

The same Vero Beach that balked at spending less than \$2 million to rebuild a boardwalk at Humiston Park that had been there since the 1930s?

Kite seems undeterred.

“It would be a big benefit to our community and be a stepping stone to the redevelopment of downtown, too,” he texted me before we spoke and told me about how he got an engineering firm to measure two potential station locations in Vero Beach:

Between Aviation Boulevard and 26th Street, near the United Against Poverty Center and planned Hogan Yards (Orchid Island Brewery) entertainment venue is planned in a renovated packinghouse.

On Commerce Avenue across the tracks from American Icon Brewery, between 19th Place and 16th/17th Street, on land owned by Brightline's partner, Florida East Coast Railway, which owns the rails. Kite's vision there would be for Brightline to build stores with workforce housing above them on, potentially connected, both sides of the tracks.

Locations centrally located, but ...



They sound like good locations for Brightline or one of the commuter rail lines that operate elsewhere in Florida. One site is right downtown; the other would, when

Aviation Boulevard eventually is widened, be a short walk or jitney ride to Vero Beach's airport.

As Kite pointed out, either location would be a short ride-share trip to hotels, shops, restaurants and public recreation planned for the Three Corners, the Jackie Robinson Training Complex, Ocean Drive, you name it.

I like Kite. We both like trains and understand the benefit of commuter rail.

He's a visionary whose has been involved in some neat projects. He also built a successful Hampton Inn in Okeechobee.

Kite is bullish on downtown Vero Beach and a champion for county tourism and economic development. He understands that building inside the area where urban services — paved roads, water, sewer, schools, etc. — exist beats expanding development inefficiently into the rural landscape, ruining our important agricultural future and jeopardizing our environment.

A fourth-generation Floridian, Kite, 68, has seen firsthand the widespread damage developers have done to its countryside, particularly around where he grew up, in Ormond Beach and elsewhere in Volusia County.

He has been bullish on Brightline since it announced plans for the service in 2013 under the moniker "All Aboard Florida."

"All Aboard Florida offers value and support for all of the reasons this state was built and why we are in it," Kite said at an Indian River County Commission meeting in 2014, noting rail service would keep millions of vehicles off state roads and help mitigate traffic problems.

Commissioners, however, upset at a lack of information received from the rail company, passed a resolution opposing it. Martin County commissioners also were opposed, spending \$4.1 million in legal fees to try and stop the train company.

Also bullish on the train in 2014 was Fort Pierce City Manager Nick Mimms, who got his commission to allocate more than \$100,000 to study whether it was feasible for the city to get a train stop. But the company initially said it would not have a Treasure

Coast stop, which fueled even more opposition. A stop, it said, would slow the time it took to get from Miami to Orlando. Time was a critical factor for riders.

It wasn't until Brightline settled its litigation with Martin County in 2018 that it committed to a stop in St. Lucie or Martin counties within five years of starting (2023) its Miami-Orlando route and making safety improvements, such as four-quadrant crossing gates.

Kite makes pitch for Fort Pierce power plant site



Also in 2018, the Fort Pierce City Commission rejected Kite's proposal to build a Hampton Inn, restaurant, shops and parking on the 8-acre site of the former H.D. King power plant downtown. The site remains empty, as the city has faced ongoing delays with a subsequent developer.

Kite, who would have invested about \$25 million to develop what was called King Station, had hoped to get the train company to build a station across the street.

Brightline, however, was not ready to commit, Kite said. It wasn't until 2023 that it requested proposals for a Treasure Coast station. Despite a strong push by Fort Pierce, Brightline awarded the site to Stuart and Martin County last year. But station plans have been bogged down since November, when a new majority of Stuart commissioners reneged on a deal with Brightline and the county.

Now, city commissioners won't even support the county's effort to obtain \$45 million in Federal Railroad Administration grants. The county has committed up to \$15 million to build for Brightline what's estimated to be a \$60 million project. Brightline can back out of the deal if the county cannot raise the balance in grants by June 30, 2027, TCPalm reported.

While I like Kite's vision and effort, it might be premature. Let's see what happens in Stuart, which, like Cocoa, which also was awarded a station, make sense for the train to slow down as it faces large curves to the north.

Perhaps the Stuart controversy, combined with President Donald Trump's Department of Government Efficiency austerity measures looming, would give other areas with privately funded plans an opening.

If so, Fort Pierce would be a solid location for the Treasure Coast. I can't see governments in Indian River County contributing anything like Martin County to a station. I wouldn't invest in a heavily indebted Brightline unless I saw credible, independent research on my or taxpayers' return on investment, something officials in Martin and Stuart told me they have not done.

I like the idea of Brightline, a quicker, more leisurely, easier way to get from Miami to Orlando. Though it says its ridership and average fares are increasing, it has a long way to go.

I'd enjoy a rail stop in town. If the price were right — and that's a big IF based on the Brightline prices I've seen and a recent story from TCPalm — I'd use it to head to Orlando airport and Miami (even stops in between). I don't like driving through the urban blob along Interstate 95 south of Palm Beach Gardens (and it's getting worse in St. Lucie and Brevard counties).

But I have no idea how many people it would serve in our community.

Getting a train station here sounds great, but, as with so many other big plans, the devil is in the details. To me, it should be privately funded. It would have to be if Trump, Elon Musk and others pull the plug on federal funding.

I like Kite's vision and optimism, but in the short term, I have little hope.

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