STATEMENT OF
DANIEL J. WOUTERS, FIRE RESCUE DEPARTMENT DIVISION CHIEF
MARTIN COUNTY, FLORIDA
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM
SUBCOMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS
HEARING ON
ALL ABOARD FLORIDA/BRIGHTLINE
THURSDAY, APRIL 19, 2018

Chairman Meadows, Ranking Member Connolly and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify today on the All Aboard Florida (AAF) passenger rail project. My name is Daniel Wouters, and I am a Division Chief of Martin County's Fire Rescue Department, responsible for emergency preparedness, response and field operations. Martin County is located on the east coast of Florida and is the next county north of Palm Beach County. Martin County's population is about 151,000, a majority of whom live near the Florida East Coast Railway corridor (FECR).

AAF is proposing to add 32 high speed passenger train crossings per day within the FECR corridor. Martin County has 27 street level or "at-grade" road crossings and Indian River County has 31 at-grade crossings within the corridor. The significant increase in the number of trains passing through these traffic congested at-grade road crossings will impact public safety because it will increase delays for fire rescue calls due to the increase in train crossings. Road closures will quadruple, blocking fire rescue units from crossing to rescue a person in need of emergency services or transport. Survivability of patients decreases with each minute the services are delayed.

Presently there are about 10 to 14 freight trains travelling in the corridor each day. In 2013 and 2014, we experienced about 238 railroad crossing delays. These delays are small considering last year our rescue vehicles cross the railroad tracks approximately 11,500 times

while responding to incidents and more than 5,600 times when transporting patients to area hospitals.

There will be substantially more delays if AAF proceeds as planned through Martin County. If AAF proceeds, the U.S. DOT estimates there will be about 52 train crossings per day, both passenger and freight. Half of our emergency response zones for each fire rescue station will be negatively impacted in transporting the critically ill or injured to hospitals, which will take much more time. These are health emergencies in which literally every second counts.

In addition to the effects of increased road closures in the normal course of train travel, the County's Fire Rescue operations will also experience potentially deadly delays when trains are staged on the tracks waiting for other trains to pass, creating even more delays. A parked freight train can be a mile long or more and could block 10 consecutive at-grade intersections near our main and most important hospital.

Why would such a train be parked? Because a nearly 100-year-old single-track-drawbridge that currently takes 20 minutes to close and reopen will be required to be "down" for each of the 32 passenger trains and 14 to 20 freight trains each day. If the bridge is not yet down, trains have to idle and stop, creating a bottle neck for trains on each side of the old bridge. The bottleneck will cause blocking at the at-grade road crossings, delaying public safety responders. I cannot overstate my concern that these delays could significantly impact the level of service adopted by Martin County to respond to emergencies.

By contrast, Palm Beach County immediately south of Martin County has about 10 times as many people and thus has more fire stations on both sides of the rail corridor to serve its much greater population, so the impact there on rescue services will be less.

Another impact to public safety results from the increased likelihood of collisions because the high speed passenger trains will be sharing the corridor with freight trains. Currently, freight trains typically travel in Martin County at speeds ranging from 30-40 mph. On the upgraded rails, AAF and FECR plan to run freight trains up to 70 mph, as long as 2 miles in length, in the same corridor as passenger trains up to the 110 mph. This increase in both the number and speed of the trains—with both the high speed passenger trains and slower, longer freight trains sharing the tracks—significantly increases the probability of trains colliding with pedestrians, bicyclists, citizens in cars, children in school buses, as well as the possibility of these passenger and freight trains colliding with each other as they travel in the same corridor.

This potential for injuries and fatalities is **real**, not hypothetical. According to an FRA Accident/Incident Overview on the FECR from 2011 through 2017, numerous fatalities and injuries occurred along the existing FECR corridor from slow-moving freight trains. FRA data lists a total of 107 fatalities and 191 injuries from 2011 through 2017, with 16 fatalities and 33 injuries occurring in 2017 alone. If 32 high-speed passenger trains and 20 faster freight trains are added to these tracks, statistically these fatality and injury figures will increase.

In fact, this is already occurring. During *trial runs* for Phase I, AAF passenger trains killed two pedestrians in separate incidents—in July 2017 and November 2017. Further, since beginning limited Phase I service between West Palm Beach and Ft. Lauderdale—a 46-mile route—in January 2018, AAF trains have struck and killed three additional people and injured others in separate incidents involving pedestrians, bicyclists and motorists.

When traffic builds on busy roadways, including at intersections near the at-grade rail crossings, motorists can inadvertently get caught on the tracks due to the changing of a traffic

signal when the traffic suddenly stops, leaving a car on the tracks between the signaling devices. Two recent incidents of this type along Phase I evidence this type of scenario.

On March 10, 2018 in the short operating segment of Phase I, an All Aboard Florida train hit a car that was stopped on the tracks. The car followed the vehicle in front of it onto the tracks. It then was stranded. Fortunately, the driver was able to exit the vehicle and survived, but had she not gotten out of the car, it could have been a very different outcome. A similar incident occurred on February 14, in which another car was hit by a train. However, in that instance, the elderly driver—who was in his vehicle stopped for a red light when the crossing gates went down—was injured, as he was unable to exit his vehicle before it was struck. The two incidents I just referenced occurred in the span of less than a month on a short 46-mile route.

Similar incidents could occur in Martin County. For example, a student drop off area for a local elementary school is located in close proximity to an at-grade rail crossing. On a daily basis, parents line up in their vehicles to drop off or pick up their kids, resulting in vehicles idling in lines that usually span the crossing of the railroad. We all know the cars are not allowed to idle on the railroad tracks. However, we also know that it only takes one inadvertent error or a car in front of another unexpectedly stopping that could result in a tragic accident.

Martin County is also deeply concerned with the fact that there are currently no pedestrian crossing facilities at 10 of the 27 at-grade crossings in Martin County, meaning that pedestrians and bicyclists can only cross the rail tracks in the roadway. AAF has told the County if the County wants pedestrian crossings, the County will have to pay for them in full.

We are also concerned for our school buses. In our community, approximately 190 school buses travel over the FECR at-grade crossings each day, with each bus being 40 feet long. After the addition of a second rail, many crossings in Martin County will have no more than 23-

30 feet of storage space between the rail and parallel roadway. We are concerned school buses could get unintentionally stuck on the tracks, just like the two cars I mentioned earlier, because of the insufficient storage space. Installation of Vehicle Presence Detection and Dynamic Exit Gates is essential.

Beyond these numerous concerns caused by the at-grade crossings, the County also is worried about the risk of train derailments and resulting collisions with vehicles, as well as other passenger or freight trains, as such incidents pose a serious threat of catastrophic damages for Martin County citizens. Again, this risk of collision or derailment is **not** hypothetical. On February 11, 2017, an AAF passenger train derailed during a test run, causing hundreds of thousands in damages and raising further questions as to the safety of the AAF trains and their failure to notify the public about the event.

Another safety issue is the potential for a devastating chemical release in Martin County. To make this point, I would like to put up a visual.

In 2015, my team conducted a Vulnerability Analysis to analyze the potential impact of a railcar crash resulting in a chemical release in Martin County, using software available from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and analyzing chemicals typically transported on FECR freight trains. In this slide, we see the potential for catastrophe based on the accidental release of just **one** chemical on **one** freight car in the rail corridor where — if the AAF project proceeds — these faster freight trains will be sharing the tracks with high speed passenger trains.

The analysis shows the potential for **significant harm** should an incident occur on the tracks within Martin County. The degree of impact would vary based on the specific chemical release, amount of the release, the location and the wind conditions, but, as you can see, the potential for catastrophic harm is very real.

Mr. Chairman, the FRA approved a $1.15 billion bond allocation for this project based on a FEIS and ROD that contained **critically deficient** safety analyses and recommendations. Given the track record of injuries and fatalities within the rail corridor, the FRA's decision to approve the Project without the safety measures we have sought is both startling and dangerous.

Daniel J. Wouters

dwouters@martin.fl.us • 800 SE Monterey Road Stuart, Florida 34994• 772-419-4573
www.martin.fl.us

Objectives

To Protect Lives, Property, and the Environment with Safety, Integrity and Excellence

Education

Indian River State College

2016 Bachelor Degree in Applied Science Public Safety Administration

2006 Associates Degree in Applied Science in Emergency Medical Services Technology

2007 Florida Fire Service Instructor I

2004 Florida Hazardous Materials Technician

1990 Florida Paramedic

1989 Florida Firefighter II

1988 Florida Emergency Medical Technician

Experience

Martin County Board of County Commissioners- Fire Rescue Department

- Division Chief, Administration- March 2018 to Present
- Division Chief, Emergency Management- October 2016- March 2018
- Division Chief Operations- March 2009-October 2016
- Battalion Chief- June 2008- March 2009
- Domestic Security Taskforce Operations Committee 2004-2005
- Hazardous Material Coordinator 2000-2009
- Lieutenant/ Paramedic 1996-2008
- Hazardous Materials Response Team 1994-2009
- Firefighter/ Paramedic 1993-1996
- Paramedic 1990-1993
- Emergency Medical Technician 1988-1990

Skills

- Emergency Management
- Disaster Planning
- Emergency Response Plans
- Incident Management Systems
- Hazardous Materials Operations
- Pre-hospital Toxicology
- Paramedicine
- Firefighting