



News Clip

Miami Herald, Friday, January 5, 2007

County considers steering Metrorail to airport

Miami-Dade is looking at scenarios to supplant a people mover into MIA, which could save the airport \$180 million and shift responsibility to another agency.

By LARRY LEBOWITZ

Miami-Dade Transit is quietly trying to find a way to run Metrorail directly into Miami International Airport, a move that could potentially save the financially strapped airport \$180 million.

Transit consultants are working on an array of scenarios to add to the current \$523 million plan to extend Metrorail 2.4 miles from the Earlington Heights station into the Miami Intermodal Center, under construction east of the airport.

If county officials succeed -- and it's a very big "if" at this point -- by 2012 a passenger arriving at MIA might be able to catch a single train all the way into downtown Miami or the popular Dadeland stations at the southern end of the original Metrorail line.

"I've always felt that Metrorail should have gone into the airport, and I'm hoping that's what we can do," Transit Director Roosevelt Bradley said in a telephone interview.

Cost estimates won't be available for another four to six weeks, said Assistant Transit Director Albert Hernandez.

The proposal will not lack controversy or critics.

Taxpayers might cast a wary eye if the project moves from the airport's ledgers to Transit, because the burden for paying for it would probably shift as well: from the gate fees paid by passengers using MIA to the half-cent local sales tax for transportation and other state taxes that underwrite mass transit projects.

Even before this latest Metrorail plan, critics have openly wondered how the county will be able to keep all its promises to voters who supported the half-cent tax in 2002 and who are expecting widespread rail expansion over the next 30 years.

COST OVERRUNS

If Metrorail replaces a planned people mover between the intermodal center and the airport, it would be a boon to the county Aviation Department, which has been struggling with mammoth cost overruns at the North and South terminals.

Aviation would save approximately \$180 million of the \$260 million budgeted for the people mover and funded by gate fees airlines pass along to passengers. The \$80 million balance is being paid by FDOT.

"I definitely would want to see Transit take it over," said Aviation Director José Abreu.

In one scenario being studied, Metrorail passengers heading from downtown into the airport would arrive at the intermodal center from the north, stopping on the second level. The same train would continue through the center, fly over Le Jeune Road and drop passengers near the moving walkways on the third level of the airport at a new station that would be built between the Dolphin and Flamingo garages.

Another scenario would require airport-bound passengers to exit at the intermodal center and walk directly across the platform to another train that would be timed to shuttle between the airport and the intermodal center every three to five minutes.

CRAMPED QUARTERS

Transit consultants are trying to find a way to incorporate an airport Metrorail station into designs for a proposed \$2.1 billion East-West corridor from the intermodal center to Florida International University's main campus.

But this scenario is proving very difficult because of limited space between the garages to accommodate Metrorail tracks and platforms for trains running in both directions, said Bill Houppermans, project manager for Transit consultant URS Corp. The consultants are also trying to solve a number of other operational problems, such as:

- How to incorporate an automated farecard system so rental car patrons can ride for free to the intermodal center, while anyone who stays on Metrorail will pay a regular fare;
- How to reconfigure the seating patterns on Metrorail trains to be more user-friendly for luggage-toting tourists heading to and from the airport.

All the Metrorail options under consideration would replace a driverless, rubber-tired train similar to the downtown Metromover that was supposed to be built and largely financed by Miami-Dade Aviation.

Inbound passengers at MIA would have picked up their luggage on the lower level, then taken elevators up to the third-floor moving walkways to catch the people mover.

The mover was supposed to drop them on the third level of the intermodal center at the grand lobby to a new \$440 million consolidated rental car facility.

The other half of the intermodal center is envisioned as Miami's version of Grand Central Station, a retail, hotel and transportation hub where Metrorail, Tri-Rail, Amtrak, Greyhound, Metrobuses and taxis would converge.

BEHIND SCHEDULE

Originally slated for completion in June 2004, the 3,800-space rental car garage is now set to open in fall 2009, according to the Florida Department of Transportation. But that best-case scenario, based on construction starting next month, will likely slip because FDOT is still haggling with contractors.

Intermodal center spokesman Ric Katz said the gap between budget and construction bids is \$140 million.

The slipping schedule at the rental car center has given the county more time to delay its selection of a vendor to design, build, operate and maintain the people mover.

The county is obligated to finish the train linking the airport and the rental car center within two years of its opening.

But the contest between three teams of construction firms armed with high powered lobbyists has been beset with controversy.

All three were eventually disqualified for a variety of technical and procedural miscues, the last as recently as September after it had already started negotiating a contract. Bid protests are expected.

Whether the people mover is eventually built by the aviation department or becomes part of a larger Metrorail expansion, one thing is certain: Traffic patterns around the airport, the intermodal center and Le Jeune Road will continue to resemble a war zone for the foreseeable future.