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North Corridor could receive boost from federal stimulus

By Risa Polansky

A federal stimulus package designed to jump-start the economy through infrastructure and transportation projects could revive Miami-Dade's stalled plans to extend Metrorail north, local officials hope.

President Barack Obama "has indicated that his priority is that whatever stimulus takes place is to include infrastructure. Well, what's more infrastructure than the North Corridor?" said Commissioner Barbara Jordan, newly named chair of the county's Transit, Infrastructure and Roads Committee. "It's one of my resolutions to get it back on track."

The North Corridor, a planned 9.5-mile extension of the Metrorail system along Northwest 27th Avenue, had for decades been promised to area communities.

It was on track to becoming a candidate for the federal funding needed to get started until the Federal Transit Administration downgraded the project last year, doubting the county could afford to build new systems and continue supporting existing ones.

But elected leaders see the expected federal stimulus as a second shot.

Commission Chair Dennis Moss has named the northern extension among his top priorities for a federal boost.

In a letter outlining the county's priorities to members of Congress, Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Alvarez wrote the project "represents an important link in expanding public transit and has regional significance."

Despite strong local support, there could be roadblocks for the North Corridor project.

"We have put it on a list, and what happens after that, I don't think anyone knows," said Albert Hernandez, assistant director of engineering, planning and development for Miami-Dade Transit.

Stimulus package guidelines have yet to be defined.

House Democrats last week introduced an \$825 billion plan, but the package needs full House and Senate votes to move forward.

Though details are still unclear, stimulus funds would probably target ready-to-go projects — a potential roadblock for the North Corridor project, to cost \$1.34 billion to plan, design, buy right of way and build.

The cost is based on a 2017 opening date and is adjusted for inflation.

"The project as it is right now is not shovel ready," Mr. Hernandez said. "Even though we're pretty advanced in the project, we're vying to go into final design."

Other needed steps: procuring a contractor and purchasing right of way — both on hold until funding falls into place.

The county was working through the Federal Transit Administration's New Starts program — the standard process for large-scale capital transportation projects seeking federal funding — to get into the final design stage, which would have made the project eligible for a full-funding grant requiring a local match.

The transit administration rates projects as it moves them through the program's stages.

The North Corridor needed at least a medium rating to get to the final design phase, but the feds gave it a medium-low "because the county had not identified enough money, not so much to build the project but to operate and maintain the project over the long term," Mr. Hernandez said.

The county expects its next rating next month.

A pro-forma released following the feds' decision last year showed the county could face a \$9 billion funding gap over the next 30 years in trying to build all promised projects and maintain existing.

Since, the county commission has taken steps to regain the feds' confidence and put the transit agency on more solid financial ground, including approving fare raises set to increase automatically every three years based on the federal consumer price index.

"Before they invest in putting federal dollars to match anything we might do, we had to demonstrate that commitment to support transit," Commissioner Jordan said. "I think it's a good beginning to show that we can support it [over time], because the fare increase does not just increase one time."

Still, Mr. Hernandez said, even if the federal stimulus came through, "we wouldn't only need money for capital, we would need money to operate and maintain" the northern rail line.

It's unclear whether stimulus funds would be limited to building or offered also to help operate and maintain transportation projects, but "we would hope — the entire country would hope — that those dollars would be for both," he said.

Though she's pushing the North Corridor project, Ms. Jordan acknowledged "that we also have to make sure that we're looking at things realistically."

The northern line is the second phase of the county's Orange Line Metrorail expansion vision, she noted.

The first is the \$526 million Miami Intermodal Center-Earlington Heights connector, designed to link the existing Earlington Heights Station to the intermodal center near Miami International Airport.

Commissioners are to be asked today (1/22) to approve a \$360.4 million contract for that project.

Still, it's on Mayor Alvarez's list of priority projects for federal funding, as new stimulus funds would free county money for other projects.

The third phase of the Orange Line, a \$2.5 billion East/West extension, also made his list.

It's still in the planning phases and without funding, Mr. Hernandez said.

No route has been set. Officials are considering running it along arteries such as State Road 836 and Southwest Eighth Street, he said, as well as "other parallel corridors to see which is the best alignment."