

Metrorail North Corridor extension derailed another year

By Larry Lebowitz

The proposed \$1.6 billion Metrorail North Corridor extension through the heart of Miami-Dade County's black community is dead for at least another year.

For the second consecutive year, U.S. regulators have rated the 9.5-mile project at a level where it will not qualify for upward of \$700 million in matching federal funds.

"It's not unexpected," said Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Alvarez. "We are going to keep looking for options."

The "medium low" rating means the project can still compete for matching federal funds in the future, but cannot enter into the final design phase.

The county was expecting the bad news last fall after commissioners refused to raise billions of dollars in new taxes to pay for long range operations and maintenance of the entire system.

Miami-Dade Transit laid off the North Corridor design consulting team in October.

The failure to bring Metrorail along the Northwest 27th Avenue corridor from 82nd Street to the Broward County line has been a political rallying point in the black community for decades.

"It's not a shock, unfortunately," said Terence Waldron, who owns a 27th Avenue business and has co-chaired a citizens advisory committee for the rail corridor for 15 years. "They keep saying we're going to get it together and they still haven't gotten it together."

Miami-Dade Transit Director Harpal Kapoor was informally notified of the repeat low rating late last week by Yvette Taylor, the Federal Transit Administration regional administrator in Atlanta. A formal announcement is expected in March or April.

The federal regulators have said that Miami-Dade will need to raise more than \$9 billion in additional local revenue over the next 30 years to adequately operate and maintain a rail system that expands to the north and western suburbs. Commission Chairman Dennis Moss said the best hope for any Metrorail expansion is a change in funding priorities coming from Washington with the Obama administration and its new transportation secretary, former Illinois congressman Ray LaHood.

Communities like Miami-Dade can afford to build new rail lines but need more long-term support for operating and maintenance funds if Washington truly wants to encourage mass transit, reduce greenhouse gases and the reliance on foreign oil, Moss said.

And, Moss said, the county might need to start looking to build the rail corridors a few miles at a time instead of gambling on winning billions of dollars in matching federal funds.

The original 1970s plans for Metrorail were supposed to run straight up 27th Avenue. But when the line opened in 1984, local political leaders had shifted the alignment westward to Hialeah.

The proposed line would run along Northwest 27th Avenue from 79th Street to the Broward County border. Six new stations would be built near Northside Shopping Center, Miami Dade College North campus, Opa-locka, the Palmetto Expressway, Miami Gardens, Dolphin Stadium and Calder Race Course.

While the North Corridor has suffered another setback, county leaders are preparing to break ground later this year on a \$523 million link that will finally take Metrorail into a new transportation hub near Miami International Airport.

The 2.4-mile link from Earlington Heights station into the new Miami Intermodal Center could open by 2012.