

News Clip

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Dade Wants Federal Money for Rail Lines

Congressman Mario Díaz-Balart brought an influential colleague to town to see the Miami Intermodal Center - the linchpin in several Metrorail projects.

By Larry Lebowitz

It will go down on the expense ledgers as a mere helicopter tour and briefing for a visiting dignitary.

But one day, if Metrorail expands as far west as Florida International University and as far north as Dolphins Stadium, Monday's visit by an influential member of Congress will be part of the city-building lore of Miami-Dade County.

U.S. Rep. Mario Díaz-Balart, R-Miami, recently appointed to the House Transportation Committee, brought subcommittee chairman Thomas Petri, R-Wisc., to Miami where a phalanx of local and state leaders asked for his help in building three new Metrorail lines at a cumulative cost of \$2.2 billion: the 2.6-mile Earlington Heights-Miami Intermodal Center spur; the 9.5-mile north corridor along Northwest 27th Avenue and the 10.1-mile east-west segment from FIU to the airport.

"This is absolutely crucial to the transportation future of this community," Díaz-Balart said after a briefing at Miami International Airport.

Miami-Dade is asking Petri, chair of the surface transportation subcommittee, to back a piece of special-interest legislation that could ultimately help Miami-Dade Transit win funding for all three lines.

The county wants to receive credit for a \$100 million state grant that is being combined with \$240 million in local sales-tax revenues to build the 2.6-mile spur from the current Earlington Heights station into the MIC, now under construction near the airport.

Because the MIC-to-Earlington Heights spur is being built without federal money, Miami-Dade needs special permission to credit some of the \$100 million state contribution toward its financing proposals for the north and east-west lines.

The county is hoping to build the \$843 million north corridor and the \$1.38 billion east-west segment with half of the money coming from the federal government, 25 percent from the state and the balance from the half-cent sales tax Miami-Dade voters approved in 2002.

While the three lines may appear to be separate projects on paper, transit boosters argue that the MIC-Earlington Heights spur is crucial to the success of both the north and the east-west corridors.

The intermodal center will provide a consolidated rental-car facility as well as a central station where taxis, local and intra-city buses, Tri-Rail and Metrorail will converge for airport passengers and workers.



LOBBYING: U.S. Reps. Mario Díaz-Balart, center, and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, both of Miami, appear Monday with transportation subcommittee chair Rep. Thomas Petri, who could help Miami-Dade get federal financing to expand the county's rail lines. C.W. GRIFFIN/HERALD STAFF

A \$260 million monorail will shuttle passengers between the MIC and the airport. On the airport end, a station will be built between the Flamingo and Dolphin garages, near the third-level moving walkways that connect all terminals.

The rental-car facility is slated to open in 2007, the central station and the monorail in 2009, and the Metrorail line into the MIC by 2011.

While not committing to any course of action, Petri seemed amenable to Miami-Dade's desire to receive credit for the \$100 million state grant.

"I am willing to say I share the objective of everyone here," Petri said. ``The best way to skin the cat is a question of judgment."

While such a move is extremely rare, the Miami-Dade Transit request is not without precedent:

San Francisco and Las Vegas both received special permission to "credit" grants from one rail project to the financial benefit of another that was seeking federal financing.

The biggest problem Monday for state and county leaders was the surprising lack of an evident problem.

On a day when they wanted to show how badly Metrorail expansion is needed, traffic around the airport flowed smoothly on the Dolphin Expressway, the Airport Expressway and even Le Jeune Road, as Díaz-Balart, Petri and a small contingent hovered overhead.

Joked County Commissioner Carlos Gimenez, head of the transportation committee: ``I guess we should have staged some accidents, after all."