



News Clip

Miami Herald, Monday, June 26, 2006

FIU gets aboard Metrorail plan

By Larry Lebowitz

Ah, the differences a week, and some negative publicity, can make.

Last week, we reported that Florida International University was prodding Miami-Dade Transit to consider building its end-of-the-line station and garage for the proposed East-West Metrorail extension in Tamiami Regional Park just south of FIU.

The university's original stance, driven by the dwindling supply of land available for future campus expansion, upset plenty of students, faculty, staff, alumni and transit boosters who believe a train from FIU to the Miami Intermodal Center would provide much-needed alternatives for thousands living in the congested western suburbs.

"FIU is a state university located in the state's metropolitan center and a major employer," said Martin Terris, a visually handicapped former FIU student who is director of research and planning at Catholic Charities. "There is no excuse for its callous attempt to deny needy commuter students or staff full access."

And that was one of the more reasoned, civilized reactions.

FIU administrators quickly moved to staunch the bleeding.

By late Friday, Assistant County Manager Carlos Bonzon was confabbing with FIU President Modesto "Mitch" Maidique.

The university's previous position was just a large misunderstanding. Everything is still on the table -- including a possible end-of-the-line station at FIU, they said.

"The president and his top staff have reassured me that at no time have they been opposed to having a station on campus," Bonzon said via speakerphone from Maidique's office. "We will explore every possible option."

The university administration understands that a commuter school like FIU would benefit from Metrorail, executive vice president and provost Ron Berkman said.

"This is something that we want to have happen," Berkman said.

Both sides acknowledge that there are plenty of issues to iron out before Transit submits its preferred alignment for the entire East-West line to county commissioners and then the federal government over the next two years.

Transit wants to build the line along the west edge of the campus, close to the Turnpike. Available land is already tight.

Both sides acknowledge that building a massive, elevated concrete-and-steel guideway like Metrorail could conflict with the National Hurricane Center's sensitive, extensive communications equipment.

And FIU would have to expand its Panther Express shuttle bus system to move people to the center and east side of the campus where most of the activity centers and classrooms are located. The university would also have to expand the shuttle if the station winds up in Tamiami Park.

Whether it's ultimately built at FIU or Tamiami, the ideal answer would be separate station-only ramps for direct access to and from the Turnpike. But that's an additional expense -- all of it borne by the tax- and toll-paying masses.

But give Maidique and Co. credit. They're saying the right things . . . now. They have recognized that FIU is still a commuter school and a major employment center. The future can't be built solely on people in cars.

Now maybe they can use some of that vision to consider retooling the campus master plan to accommodate a station on campus that could one day prove as functional to the community as the Datran developments near Dadeland South.

Perhaps FIU needs to take a few cues from their counterparts at Miami Dade College. Dr. Eduardo Padron and Co. certainly get it when it comes to public transportation.

The downtown Wolfson campus is connected by Metrorail, Metromover and bus.

The MDC administration is actively working with Transit and Miami city transportation planners to make sure its students and employees of tomorrow have plenty of access options.

The proposed North Corridor Metrorail extension will be running up Northwest 27th Avenue, from 79th Street to the Broward County border.

The only real deviation will be a major jog to the west just south of 119th Street, for a proposed stop right in the middle of the MDC North campus. Transit Director Roosevelt Bradley says the MDC North stop will be a major ridership generator.

It's no accident that the emergence of an East-West spur along Northwest 20th Street is being proposed for the city Streetcar, running it right through MDC's Medical Campus on the way to Jackson Memorial Hospital and the Civic Center district.

Easy, efficient, accessible public transportation is the key to the future of a working-class and commuter campus.

MDC clearly gets it. FIU is starting to understand.

Got a commuting question or an idea for a future column? Contact Larry Lebowitz at streetwise@Miami

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