



News Clip

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Miami airport train deal OK'd

A train between Miami International Airport and its new rental-car and transportation center will cost \$30 million more than originally planned.

BY MATTHEW I. PINZUR

With a price tag some \$30 million over its original budget, Miami-Dade commissioners approved a deal Tuesday to build and run a \$342 million train between Miami International Airport and a new rental-car center and transit hub.

"We all know how things have gone up," said county aviation director José Abreu, citing soaring costs for concrete and other construction materials.

To close the gap, the airport expects to get permission from the state to dip into grants that had been set aside for other projects.

Abreu wants rental-car companies to voluntarily reimburse half of the \$30 million increase. But those companies -- including huge national brands and tiny local ones -- have powerful lobbyists, and Abreu conceded ``it's not going to be easy."

The train, known as the MIA Mover, will link the terminal to the still-under-construction Miami Intermodal Center, which will house most rental cars and is eventually envisioned as a hub for MetroRail, Greyhound and Amtrak.

Only Commissioner Sally Heyman voted against the contract. Three others -- Dorrin Rolle, Natacha Seijas, Joe Martinez -- were absent.

The Mover -- scheduled to open by 2011 -- has been controversial at times; some county leaders simply wanted to extend Metrorail all the way to the airport and others wanted to connect the buildings with shuttle buses.

Its eight-figure price jump has been met with resigned frustration by a county commission that has watched budgets busted and deadlines blown on nearly every aspect of MIA's renovation. The North Terminal alone has leapt from its original 1995 estimate of \$975 million to almost \$2.9 billion today, and the recently opened South Terminal was two years behind schedule.

The debt is largely financed by bonds and repaid through landing fees and other charges paid by airlines and other airport tenants. But Abreu did not want to issue more debt to cover the MIA Mover price increase.

Overruns on the MIA Mover would be covered by the contractor, Parson-Oderbrecht Joint Venture, unless the county changes the plans mid-stream.

The company also would handle maintenance and other operating costs for up to 15 years under the contract.

"There's no such thing as risk-free on anything in life, but this is as close as it gets," Abreu said.

Heyman said she voted against the deal because of concerns about coordinating the project timeline with the intermodal center.

"It's like a massive puzzle all coming together," she said.

The Mover is often confused with another over-budget airport train, which will ferry passengers between different parts of the North Terminal.

Those trains became a county-hall punchline when the government had to pay the Japanese manufacturer to "exercise" the cars when construction delays made it impossible to deliver them to MIA on time.

The price jump on the MIA Mover was hardly unexpected; county planners have been warning about it since at least mid-2006.

But additional funding was never set aside, forcing Abreu to yank funds from four other projects:

- \$11.1 million to renovate the airfield to accommodate Airbus' huge new A380 jet, which became unnecessary when federal regulators made the standards less stringent.
- \$6 million from a project to retrofit three gates to handle the A380. Only one gate will be adapted, which Abreu said was sufficient because only one airline -- Lufthansa -- has committed to fly the jet into Miami.
- \$3.9 million from the new terminal's sign budget, which will force the airport to use traditional printed signs instead of electronic ones to point passengers to areas such as baggage claim, parking lots and gates.
- \$9 million to build a new parking garage. Abreu said it will still be built, but probably as part of a public-private development project he hopes will bring shopping, more hotel rooms or a convention to the airport.

"The line of interested people would be from here to Taco Taco," he joked, saying the profitability of an airport parking garage makes it attractive to private investors.

Abreu said it was reasonable to tap those projects because of something they all had in common: They required the county to match the state investment.

"We don't have the money to match," Abreu said.

The price would have been even higher, but the county eliminated a few parts of the project when earlier bids were so far over budget.

The most significant change canceled plans to build two extra walkways from the terminal to the MIA Mover station; as a result, travelers at some far flung gates could have to walk more than 1,000 feet instead of 535 under the original blueprint.

Miami Herald staff writer Ina Paiva Cordle contributed to this report.