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Subject: **Metrorail expansion still stuck in neutral**

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Metrorail expansion still stuck in neutral

BY LARRY LEBOWITZ

Fact: In 2002, Miami-Dade County voters approved a half-cent sales tax for widespread mass transit and transportation improvements.

Among the promises: a 17-mile, \$2.7 billion East-West elevated Metrorail line that would run from the western suburbs into a new transit hub near Miami International Airport, the Orange Bowl and then via tunnel under the Miami River into downtown and the Port of Miami.

Assumptions: A number of people voted for the People's Transportation Plan due to the promise of an expanded east-to-west Metrorail, and a smaller subset voted for the tax because they wanted a station at the Orange Bowl.

Fact: In early 2004, for a number of political, ethnic and financial reasons, county leaders mothballed the eastern half of the East-West that voters were promised.

Fact: County and congressional leaders started promoting the so-called Orange Line -- because that was the color used to highlight potential new corridors on maps from that era -- compromise.

The Orange Line is really three separate but linked Metrorail projects: a 9.5-mile North Corridor up Northwest 27th Avenue; a 2.4-mile spur from the airport to the original line at Earlington Heights; and a new, 10- to 13-mile East-West from the airport to either Florida International University or the suburbs west of Florida's Turnpike.

Fact: In August 2007, the University of Miami announced it would be leaving the venerable but decrepit Orange Bowl for Dolphin Stadium starting with the 2008 season.

Fact: Within minutes, city and county leaders abandon plans to renovate the Orange Bowl and start crafting a deal to publicly finance a 37,000-seat, \$565 million, retractable-roof stadium on the same site for the Florida Marlins.

Fact: A deal, in principle, is struck by mid-December 2007 between the city, the county and the team, as the centerpiece of the downtown Megaplan that also includes funding for a port tunnel, the performing arts center, a museum park and a city streetcar.

Fact: Even with fewer seats than the Orange Bowl, the new Marlins ballpark is going to create some serious traffic access and parking issues in Little Havana over an 81-game home schedule than six home football Saturdays with the Canes.

If the Marlins draw more than 15,000 fans a night -- that's 15,000 fannies in the seats, not the mirage of "announced attendance" -- access and parking will be very tight.

The preliminary plans call for 6,000 on-site parking spaces in three multi-level garages and a smattering of surface lots.

Fact: Two-thirds of Marlins home games are played on weeknights, meaning fans will be pressed to reach the Orange Bowl area on packed expressways at the tail end of the evening rush hour.

Fact: With the decision to erase the eastern half of the East-West in 2004, mass transit isn't going to run any closer to the new Marlins ballpark today than it did for the Orange Bowl.

Fact: Fans who take Metrorail and Tri-Rail will still have to walk a mile across the Miami River from the closest station at the Civic Center.

The city and the Marlins are expected to develop additional game-day shuttles to the Culmer Metrorail station and possibly for remote parking areas near FIU, the Flagler Dog Track, Civic Center parking garages and downtown office towers.

Fact: Widespread Metrorail expansion is no closer to reality than it was in 2002 when voters agreed to tax themselves.

The only piece of the Orange Line that appears close to a certainty at this point is the 2.4-mile spur from Earlington Heights into the Miami Intermodal Center -- and that won't make a whit of difference to anyone heading to the Marlins ballpark.

Fact: County leaders are planning to let the public lambaste them for all of the failed promises of the 2002 campaign at a transportation summit on Nov. 15 at a location still to be determined.

It will be interesting to see if anyone asks why the county government can find the means to publicly finance a new ballpark but can't find the wherewithal to build a financially stable transportation system that can serve the stadium. Unless the county does some seismic reshuffling of its Metrorail priorities and comes up with billions of dollars in new tax revenues to prop up the perpetually underfunded transit agency, it isn't going to happen.

This isn't an anti-stadium screed. It's simply another illustration of priorities shifting like the tropical breezes in this community.

And how transportation, in general, and mass transit, in particular, are usually relegated to the back of the pack.