

Metrorail extension scheduled to be completed in April 2012

Officials say an extension of Metrorail to a transit hub near Miami International Airport is scheduled for completion in 2012.

By Alfonso Chardy

A \$526 million extension of Metrorail to a transit hub just east of Miami International Airport is on track to be finished by April 2012, the second extension of the elevated heavy-rail train since the system was originally started in the 1980s, transit officials said Tuesday.

They provided the information to El Nuevo Herald in advance of a public meeting Tuesday night to celebrate the halfway mark in the construction of the 2.4-mile extension from Earlington Heights station to the Miami Intermodal Center now being built near MIA. From the MIC, passengers would reach MIA terminals via an automated train known as MIA Mover now being built.

The meeting from 6 to 8 p.m. at the Sheila Winitzer Central Administration Building, 3300 NW 32nd Avenue, drew residents, business owners and community leaders.

Miami-Dade Transit director Harpal Kapoor and other transit officials briefed the audience, telling it the project is on time and on budget and that completion is expected in April 2012. Previously, officials had only talked about finishing the project in the spring of 2012.

“This is a signature project,” Kapoor said. “A promise we're going to keep.”

The project is financed largely by a \$426 million contribution from proceeds of the so-called People's Transportation Plan, a program funded from revenue generated by a half-cent sales tax in Miami-Dade. The remaining \$100 million comes from the Florida Department of Transportation.

After it was built, transit officials over the years said the one-line Metrorail, running from Dadeland to the Palmetto Expressway in the north of the county, would grow not only to the airport but also to the Broward county line.

But in the end, only the MIA extension became a reality.

In July, County Manager George Burgess said in a memo that the long-planned Orange Line Metrorail extension to the Broward boundary would not happen because of a lack of funds.

An \$87.8 million extension from Okeechobee station to Palmetto station just west of the expressway was completed in 2003. It was the first such Metrorail extension since 1989, after the basic one-line system was completed.

The MIA station will be the 23rd Metrorail station in the system since construction began in 1980. Whether any new extensions will be built any time soon is unknown.

When the half-cent tax passed, local officials promised several new Metrorail lines, but ultimately, only the airport extension was possible. Funds generated by the tax were never enough to fulfill the promises that officials later acknowledged were based on not much more than wishful thinking.

Construction of the MIA extension began in May 2009.

Much of the foundation work for the supporting columns of the elevated guideway is approaching completion, officials said Tuesday.

Construction is now focused on installing guideway segments over supporting piers.