

# Metrorail about to link airport to downtown and suburbs

## AirportLink to be tested this spring, open for the public in the summer

BY SCOTT BLAKE

Miami's first mass-transit rail directly linking Miami International Airport to downtown and the county's outlying suburbs is about to start operating.

With construction almost complete, the "AirportLink" Metrorail extension is scheduled for testing this spring and to start serving the public sometime this summer, said Miami-Dade Transit spokeswoman Karla Damian.

The \$506 million project is expected to alter the face of mass transportation in Greater Miami, with the new link projected to add millions of riders a year to Metrorail, Miami-Dade's heavy rail system.

"Millions of people use the airport. This is going to make it easier to access the airport, both for people who travel there and the people who work there," Ms. Damian said.

"This also will make downtown more accessible," she added. "For a lot of people who come in to do business in this area, this will make their business travel more accessible."

The 2.4-mile elevated heavy rail extension will run from the new Miami Intermodal Center next to the airport to Metrorail's Earlington Heights station.

The new link means passengers will be able to travel to and from the airport and Metrorail's 22 other stations that link Miami's urban core and central business districts to surrounding communities such as Hialeah and Medley to the northwest and Coconut Grove, Coral Gables, South Miami and Kendall to the southwest.

At the Intermodal Center, AirportLink will enable riders to connect to other train systems such as Amtrak intercity service, the South Florida commuter Tri-Rail and an "Automated People Mover" light rail to the airport's terminals.

AirportLink riders also will have access there to Greyhound and county buses, taxis and rental cars.

A specific start date for the AirportLink line still needs to be set, Ms. Damian said.

"We're looking at how the testing goes, and we're integrating new equipment to our existing equipment, so we need to be testing that, too," she said.

Fares for the Metrorail system range from several dollars for a daily ticket to more expensive weekly and monthly passes. AirportLink will be part of the same fare system, Ms. Damian said.

The extension is considered a key part of the People's Transportation Plan, approved by Miami-Dade voters in 2002.

More than \$404 million of AirportLink's funding came from a half-penny sales tax increase approved as part the plan. Another \$101 million came from state Department of Transpor-

tation.

AirportLink will run west from the Earlington Heights station over Northwest 27th Avenue, parallel to State Road 112. The extension then will turn south, crossing over the Miami River, and continuing south to the Intermodal Center.

The Metrorail system started operating in 1984. The system currently has more than 22 miles of tracks and an average daily ridership of more than 66,000.

AirportLink is expected to change the nature of the system.

"With this project," reads a statement on Miami-Dade Transit's website, "Miami-Dade County joins the ranks of other major cities with rapid transit connections to their airports."



Photo by Maxine Usdan

Metromover station at Central Station, the intermodal center that will link multiple transportation modes.

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April 19

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