



News Clip

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By train, bus, bike, new transportation options for Miami's urban core

By Andres Viglucci

Maryann Romero happily left her car at her Brickell Avenue condo to go shopping downtown the other day, an urban outing made possible only recently with the launch of the city of Miami's free Brickell-Biscayne trolley-bus line.

Romero rode the throwback-style trolley bus through the bustle of downtown and the financial district, the happy-hour crowds at Brickell Village and joggers on Brickell Key. A mom picked up her son at Southside Elementary, domestic workers took the trolley to the Brickell Metrorail station, and office workers hopped on for a few blocks to shorten the walk home on a drizzly afternoon.

For people who, like Romero, live and work in and around downtown, the new trolley is only a small taste of what's to come. From taking trains to planes, from riding bicycles or sleek, fast buses to the far corners of Miami-Dade County and beyond, nothing less than a multi-modal transportation revolution is in the offing for Miami's urban core, and none of it involves private cars.

On July 28, the new Metrorail Orange Line to Miami International Airport will begin service, for the first time directly linking downtown by train to the principal portal to the city for millions of travelers.

And in as little as five years, assuming all plans pan out, downtowners and commuters also will be able to:

- Jump on a new, privately run All Aboard Florida passenger train and, having dined on a gourmet meal, arrive in Orlando in three hours, far less than it takes to drive;
- Ride Bus Rapid Transit — hybrid double buses with preferential right-of-way — to west Miami-Dade on State Road 836, or all the way up Biscayne Boulevard to Aventura, or along

27th Avenue to the Broward County line. The buses can beat traffic because they turn traffic lights green as they approach, make limited stops at elevated stations for fast boarding, and travel on expressway shoulders and express lanes;

- Stay close to home and circumnavigate downtown, Brickell and outlying urban districts on a network of free trolleys, a cleaned-up, improved Metromover system, or on a bicycle or Smart car rented on the street with the swipe of a card.

Already, apart from two new city trolley routes, some smaller-scale launches have expanded the transportation alternatives for commuters and the growing number of people who call downtown home.

Miami-Dade transit has been running well-used express commuter buses to Broward from downtown for two years. Its counterpart in Broward just launched its own version, connecting Sunrise with Fort Lauderdale and downtown Miami along the express lanes on Interstate 595 and I-95, and is reporting high ridership.

And Tropical Pedicabs, a startup by a group of young entrepreneurs, is running five pedal-powered passenger trikes from Mary Brickell Village to downtown Miami and out to the Miami Marlins stadium.

The panoply of launches and planned transportation options, a combination of private and public initiatives, is a response to two realities, backers say: The collapse of costlier plans for Metrorail expansion, high-speed intra-state rail and a city light-rail streetcar line, combined with an explosion in downtown population and activity that makes providing alternatives to the private automobile not just necessary, but feasible.

“We live in a maturing city,” said Albert Sosa, Miami’s chief of capital improvement projects. “We’re becoming a lot more urbanized and cosmopolitan. And as we become more urban, it better lends itself to transit.”

That will only become more so as new cultural facilities, including new homes for the Miami Art Museum and the Miami Science Museum, and mixed-use mega-developments like Swire’s Brickell CitiCentre, open downtown over the next few years, said Jim Murley, executive director of the South Florida Regional Planning Council.

Murley, long an advocate for expanded regional transit connections, said he’s encouraged at the broad menu of options being explored, noting that each successful mode will remove cars from downtown’s traffic-choked streets.

It’s also significant that private entrepreneurs are investing in alternative transportation, he said, cautioning that slowing gas-tax receipts could put a strain on government transit funding.

“We’re effectively experimenting with a suite of options to test what works work in the marketplace — and in our humid, sometimes rainy environment,” Murley said. “If they’re predictable, and they’re there when we need them, I’m confident they will find a place. And that will be great.”

The available evidence suggests there’s plenty of pent-up demand for alternatives to fighting traffic and parking fees. Well more than 700,000 riders now travel every month on the long-established but once underused Metromover, and ridership is climbing, Miami-Dade transit

figures show. The agency also projects that the MIA connection will add thousands of new monthly rides to the 25-year-old Metrorail system.

Conceived as a quickly achievable substitute for fixed-rail streetcars, the two new city trolley lines — one a loop running between the Jackson Memorial Hospital district and the new Miami Marlins ballpark, and the second running from the foot of the Rickenbacker Causeway to the Omni — carry a combined 1,500 riders on non-game days, with sharply higher use when the team plays at home.

The Brickell-Biscayne line, inaugurated last month, has exceeded early-ridership projections by a factor of three, prompting the city to announce an additional, once-a-month route from downtown to Wynwood and Midtown Miami for art walks, which take place on the second Saturday of every month, starting in July.

If it proves popular, that line will be run every Saturday, Sosa said. The city also plans to link the health-district and Brickell-Biscayne lines along 14th Street, and eventually extend service into surrounding neighborhoods.

“I love it,” Romero said of her trolley ride, her second. “I just relax. And it’s a wonderful sightseeing tour also.”

Earlier in May, the city parking authority approved another potential groundbreaker: a car-share program run by Daimler’s Car2go subsidiary. As early as July, Car2go will make 250 two-seat Smart cars available for short jaunts. The city also plans a bike-share program similar to Miami Beach’s popular DecoBikes, which earlier this month saw its millionth rider in just over a year of operation, and has also put in a bid to run Miami’s system. Planners expect the heaviest usage for the car and bike programs to be in and around downtown.

Neither the bike-share nor the car-share program requires taxpayer money. Like the Beach bike-share, Miami’s would be supported by rental proceeds and ads on rental kiosks.

Those smaller programs would supplement some ambitious plans now under development by Miami-Dade transit and Florida East Coast Industries, the rail and real-estate empire founded by Henry Flagler, whose railroad along the state’s eastern shore marked the start of modern Florida and transformed Miami from backwater to metropolis.

The FEC, whose rail operations now focus on freight, stepped into the breach left by Gov. Rick Scott’s rejection of federal money for a planned high-speed rail line connecting Miami and Tampa via Orlando.

The company intends to invest \$1 billion to reinstate passenger service from Miami along its existing line, recently refurbished to accommodate expanded cargo service to and from the Port of Miami, and to build a new spur from Cocoa Beach to Orlando. The All Aboard Florida passenger trains, though not high-speed rail, would run frequently and make stops in Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach, the FEC says.

Detailed engineering and ridership studies are now underway, and trains could start running as soon as 2014, FEC spokeswoman Christine Barney said.

“We think this will be transformative,” she said, noting that projections developed for high-speed rail concluded that more than 2 million people would use the service annually.

“We have seen nothing but enthusiasm for this idea. There is a great opportunity here for business travelers and families and other leisure travelers who really want to avoid highway congestion.”

To maximize its appeal and usefulness, she said, the FEC also hopes to tie its new passenger line into existing mass transit at each stop.

Though precise end points have yet to be determined, the FEC owns several acres of vacant land around its downtown Miami spur. The county’s Metropolitan Planning Organization, responsible for transportation strategy, has been studying the possibility of a new multi-modal transit station in the area, which also includes the site of the demolished Miami Arena and the Overtown and Government Center Metrorail stations.

The linchpin of the county transit agency’s plans is the long-awaited, \$500 million Metrorail airport link — the sole survivor of a series of heavy-rail extensions promised to voters when they approved a half-penny transportation surtax in 2002. Miami-Dade County officials eventually acknowledged that surtax revenue, much of which wound up subsidizing existing transit operations, was not enough to finance billions of dollars worth of Metrorail expansion.

Instead, the county opted to do what it could with surtax money, which provides the fiscal base for the city trolleys and other local transportation improvements. Funds also come from the Florida Department of Transportation, which put up \$100 million of the money for the new Metrorail line to MIA, transit director Ysela Llort said.

That new elevated guideway links the existing Earlington Heights station with a gleaming, futuristic new Metrorail station at the Miami Intermodal Center, the partially completed “grand central station” of Miami known as the MIC, which connects to the adjacent airport via a short new PeopleMover ride.

With the new station’s upcoming inauguration, Metrorail will have two train lines: the new Orange Line, with trains going directly from Dadeland South along all existing stops to the MIC; and the existing line, rebaptized as the Green Line, with trains running from Dadeland South all the way to the Palmetto Expressway western terminus.

That means passengers wanting to travel between MIA and the Palmetto will change trains at Earlington Heights. Orange Line passengers will be able to reach MIA without changing trains.

That direct airport connection would also tie together downtown Miami and the MIC, which is slated to become a giant commuter hub.

A new station is under construction at the MIC for Tri-Rail, the commuter rail that runs to West Palm Beach.

Miami-Dade transit also plans to run BRT express buses — increasingly popular around the world as an alternative to costlier rail transit — from the MIC north along 27th Avenue, and west to Florida International University and beyond to Southwest 147 Avenue along 836 and Southwest Eighth Street. Those are routes county officials had once hoped to cover by Metrorail.

No budget has been developed, but the system would be financed with surtax and state money, Llort said.

Meanwhile, the agency has put new cars on the downtown Metromover and begun sprucing up its stations, installing new shade canopies and repairing long-broken escalators. The long-closed Bicentennial Park station will be refurbished and reopened in time for the art museum's opening, and Swire will build an entirely new, cutting-edge station integrated into its CitiCentre project.

"Transportation changes the landscape of cities," Llorca said, "but you have to make these things convenient and attractive."