



News Clip

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Transportation hub snafu could cost millions

Amtrak says design team was warned tracks weren't long enough, trains would block street

By Christina Vazquez

A design mistake on a transportation hub construction project near Miami International Airport could cost taxpayers millions and create major traffic problems in the area.

Plans for the Miami Intermodal Center were developed to allow mass-transit passengers to bounce between several transportation options, including the Miami International Airport's Rental Car Center, MIA Mover, AirportLink and the Miami Central Station, which is currently under construction.

Carl Filer, Florida Department of Transportation's District 6 Miami Intermodal Center Program Manager, said Miami Central Station is a first for Miami-Dade County. The ground transportation hub was designed to connect passengers to various forms of transportation to include Greyhound, Miami-Dade Metrobus, Metrorail, Tri-Rail, taxi cabs, and Amtrak.

"This is where all the systems in Dade County will be able to interchange from one mode to another. You will be able to transfer from bus, to rail, to the airport," said Filer. "So this really is a big deal for life in Miami-Dade County."

Located east of MIA's Rental Car Center, it is bordered by Northwest 25th Street on the north, Northwest 37th Avenue on the east, Northwest 21st Street on the south and Northwest 38th Court on the west.

The project had been running smoothly. In fact, Filer said it's halfway to completion. Then project leaders found out the tracks designated for Amtrak are not long enough to accommodate some of its trains. With the current plan, the rail cars would block Northwest 25th Street for up to 40 minutes at a time.

“We have a situation where their longest train, which is the Silver Meteor, would block the roadway every time it came to the station,” said Filer.

Filer said he didn’t find out about the problem until he overheard an Amtrak representative talking about it during groundbreaking.

"I heard an off the hand comment from one of the Amtrak representatives who was there, who said there was a little bit of an issue, in his opinion, with the proximity of the end of our platform to Northwest 25th street. So I try following up with the individual and finally got a response back from them in the early part of 2012. And it was their recommendation to the department that we would do something about 25th Street, relocate it or have a run-around that would allow vehicles to traverse this area when the trains came into the station," said Filer.

After years of planning and millions of dollars already spent, Filer said the he is still baffled by how the snafu happened.

"It would have been nice to know before we started construction. Obviously, these things, we would have hoped would have been all realized and worked out before we actually started the work," said Filer.

Amtrak's spokeswoman Christina Leeds told Local 10's Christina Vazquez in an e-mail: "Amtrak always cautioned the design team that Amtrak trains would block 25th St. due to train length."

AECOM, a company that specializes in worldwide transportation projects, is in charge of research, planning and design of the MIC project. Marino Llamas is the company’s project architect.

"My answer to that is the personnel we were dealing with at Amtrak and coordinating with at Amtrak did not have that point of view,” said Llamas. “Keep in mind we didn't design this project in a vacuum. I coordinated with all the different users of the project. I get their input as far as their operational requirements and we develop the design based on those requirements."

Llamas said the team met with Amtrak representatives several times. MIC project spokesperson Ric Katz said Amtrak's president and operations staff even came to Miami for a site visit in November of 2010. "They also had an opportunity to review our drawings at the different phases of the design and so I am a little perplexed at that comment," said Llamas.

"They did have the opportunity at previous times throughout the length of the project to identify that they needed a longer platform. They did not, so I caution someone to read that and get the perception that the designer was incorrect, that we made a mistake."

"I think they have had lots of opportunities to express this to us and make us fully understand what the ramifications were before it happened," said Filer. "Amtrak has always told us they could work with us on this situation but it never came to realization that their work around was that they would always block Northwest 25th Street when it came into the station."

Northwest 25th Street is temporarily closed between Northwest 38th Court and 37th Avenue/Douglas Road. It is an industrial area with little residential impact.

One of the proposed solutions involves permanently closing that section of Northwest 25th Street in order to extend Amtrak's platform by 220 feet. That would mean the new, longer platform would rest on the street.

Traffic studies and other evaluations are now being conducted, officials said. Once the findings are in, FDOT said it will be in a better position to determine the cost to taxpayers. FDOT said it is already making plans to assume the cost. Llamas said he believes it will run between \$4 million and \$5 million.

However, despite the setback, project leaders said they believe the economic benefit of more visitors coming to South Florida on Amtrak's longer trains will off-set the money spent to extend the platform.

"I think it is a win for this community to actually have more Amtrak service coming into the station," said Filer.

Llamas said the design snafu is minor considering the overall magnitude of the project. According to MIC's Project Overview, the United States Department of Transportation (USDOT), "Designated the MIC Program as a Major Project under the Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act (TIFIA) of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA21)."

Federal, state and county leaders have been working on the broader MIC program since it was conceived in the late 1980s. FDOT's Major Investment Study and Draft Environmental Impact Statement was approved by the Federal Highway Administration in 1995. USDOT granted the location and design concept in 1998.

"The cost of the Miami Central Station component is approximately \$89 million. And to take it in perspective, the platform extension will probably not exceed, I'll take a guess, it won't exceed more than \$4 or \$5 million. So yeah, to take it into perspective, it is a minor hiccup."

Project leaders told Local 10 they are planning a public hearing for mid-February so the public can share their thoughts on the various options to solve the Miami Central Station glitch. The date, time and location have yet to be decided.