



News Clip

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North Metrorail plan sure to fail again

BY LARRY LEBOWITZ

Barring a highly unlikely miracle, the Metrorail North Corridor extension along Northwest 27th Avenue through the heart of the black community is as good as dead for at least another year.

Miami-Dade County will technically, legally, and semantically meet Thursday's deadline to submit a new financial plan to federal regulators for the line that would run from 81st Street to the Broward County line.

But the feds, who rejected and downgraded Miami-Dade's last North Corridor application in February, will see right through this year's model for the cynical election-season joke that it is.

Earlier this month, County Manager George Burgess finally presented the Alvarez administration's "ugly truth" plan:

If commissioners want to build the so-called Orange Line -- expanding Metrorail to the north, the west and through the transportation hub near the airport -- Miami-Dade needs to come up with another \$9.4 billion over the next 30 years.

That's \$9.4 billion -- with a "b" -- on top of the property, sales and gas taxes, fares and parking fees and federal and state grants that are already supporting the deficit-plagued transit agency.

To fill that hole, commissioners were going to have to raise fares and parking fees; increase the gas tax by two cents a gallon and pony up \$5.4 billion in new property taxes over the next 30 years.

The manager also said commissioners would have to undo several key promises from the 2002 campaign that created the sales tax that was supposed to attract *beaucoup* federal dollars to pay for all of this Metrorail expansion in the first place.

Commissioners, in a typical display of election-year courage and semantic contortions, refused to deal with any of the tough financial issues but voted to submit the North Corridor application by the July 31 deadline.

HEADS IN THE SAND

While transit agencies around the country are raising fares to deal with the crush of new passengers and the rising cost of fuel, Miami-Dade commissioners stuck their heads in the sand.

So what happens when the regulators take a look at this \$9.4 billion plan and ask the inevitable next question: ``Who's agreeing to implement these fare hikes and tax increases?''

Well, uh. . .

Remember, this is the same set of federal analysts who called out last year's plan as utterly unrealistic and ridiculous.

So why submit a plan that is doomed to fail? Politics, naturally. Six commissioners are up for reelection next month.

By meeting the federal deadline, black commissioners can tell their constituents, who've been waiting for the North line for more than 30 years, that they are still fighting the good fight.

The Hispanic commissioners can go on the radio and tell their supporters they're holding a hard line against new taxes and fare increases in a plummeting economy.

Even the mayor -- who is facing token opposition for a second term -- receives some political cover from this cynical charade.

After the feds knocked down the North Corridor rating in February, Alvarez faced the conspiracy theorists and naysayers in the black community.

The mayor told the skeptical audience that the North is still the county's No. 1 priority and he guaranteed there would be no repeat of last year's debacle when Miami-Dade missed its deadlines and begged the feds for more time to submit the plan.

When next February rolls around, the mayor can honestly tell black leaders he kept his word, even if the North Corridor is no closer to becoming reality.

Here's another cynical reason the commissioners are keeping the Metrorail plan alive, when they know they don't have the votes to raise \$9.4 billion:

A lot of high-powered consultants, represented by the top tier of lobbying talent at County Hall, are still feeding from the trough of Metrorail dreams.

Most of those consultants are cranking out résumés, assuming that the county will soon be forced to abandon the North and the East-West projects.

The only Orange Line project likely to move forward is the only one that isn't seeking federal funds, the 2.4-mile, \$526 million spur that will finally bring Metrorail into Miami International Airport -- or at least the transportation hub rising just east of MIA.

The incumbent commissioners will have one more shot at rescuing this mess the week after the Aug. 26 election.

The final North Corridor application is due in Washington, with all of the i's dotted and t's crossed, on Sept. 5.

Commissioners have set another meeting for Sept. 2 to consider all of the pieces of Burgess' \$9.4 billion plan.

Maybe then, after their reelection has been assured, they'll start to come clean as Commissioner Dennis Moss has suggested.

Moss wants to hold a transportation summit, inviting the public to hear the ugly reality and let citizens vent about the failed promises of the half-cent sales tax.

REALISTIC PRIORITIES

Then, Moss believes, it will be time for Miami-Dade to start setting some realistic priorities.

Unless, of course, enough angry, organized citizens start pushing a petition drive aimed at putting a repeal of the half-cent sales tax on the ballot in 2010.

Repealing the tax would throw Miami-Dade Transit's finances into even further chaos.

Do you have a commuting question or an idea for a future column? Contact Larry Lebowitz at streetwise@MiamiHerald.com or call him at 305-376-3410 or 954-764-7026, ext. 3410.