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News Clip

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Car-rental hub delayed for two years

By Charlotte Libov

A car-rental hub for Miami International Airport is to be delayed for two years and have scaled-back capacity because building costs have risen and rental-car traffic is expected to be lighter than planned.

The hub is the first phase of the \$1.3 billion Miami Intermodal Center, linking all modes of transportation near the airport.

The rental hub had been scheduled to open this year, but Ric Katz, a spokesman for the Florida Department of Transportation, said it's now set for August 2008.

Revised plans call for 6,800 car spaces, down from 9,500; 30 car-wash bays, cut from 42; and 84 fuel pumps, down from the 120 originally planned.

The hub is "still plenty big," Mr. Katz said. "The footprint is 20 acres, the same as it was. It's still four floors, the same as it was. This is a plenty big building, even if it's been sized down a little bit. It will also be expandable so that if, as we all hope, the demand is there, then we will be able to enlarge it."

The plan revisions reflect that fewer rental firms than originally expected will use the hub. Sixteen have expressed interest, down from the 22 anticipated.

A reduction in expected rental-car traffic, Mr. Katz said, is the main reason the hub was downsized. "When you're building a billion-dollar program, things happen, but most of its postponement had to do with the reduction of rental-car traffic after the attack of 9/11."

A transaction fee levied on car renters is to help fund the project. The fee, now \$3.50, is to rise to \$4 when the rental hub is ready.

Rising construction costs also played a role in the downsizing. Ordinarily, scaling back might cut costs, but that has not occurred, Mr. Katz said, because of the rising cost of materials, primarily concrete and steel imported from China.

The intermodal center attracted \$433 million in loans from the Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act, a program in which the US Department of Transportation aids major surface projects of regional significance. The Florida Department of Transportation is to repay the loan.

According to Mr. Katz, the rest of the intermodal center's phases are on track, "perhaps not from 1993, when we first began planning," but in more recent timetables.

The rental-car hub must be finished two years before the completion of Central Station, which is expected to open in 2010 and unite all the region's modes of transportation.

That year also is expected to see the opening of the Earlington Heights extension of Metrorail and of a people mover to take airline passengers from terminals to the intermodal center.

Construction of the rental hub began in 2003, and most underground work is finished. The foundation is nearly complete, Mr. Katz said, and above-ground construction is expected to begin soon.

Roadwork also is well underway, he said. "Just doing the roadwork alone would be considered a major, major undertaking, but that is dwarfed by the rest of the project."