

FIELD OFFICE3845 NW 25th Street
Miami, Florida 33142www.micdot.com
1 888 838 5355

Miami Intermodal Center



News Clip

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People mover favored for MIA

A draft report finds that a people mover is preferable to extending Metrorail into MIA; a county committee is in talks with a bidder on a contract.

By LARRY LEBOWITZ

The latest attempt to extend Metrorail directly into Miami International Airport appears to be faltering.

Miami-Dade Transit's own consultants are concluding that a rubber-tired automated people mover that would run from the airport to the Miami Intermodal Center is a better option, according to a draft report obtained Thursday by The Miami Herald.

And in a related development, a county selection panel announced Thursday that it was trying to end a two-year logjam and open negotiations with a team of influential construction firms and train manufacturers to build the automated people mover.

The people mover "is head and shoulders over all other concepts being considered," said Sunil Harman, director of aviation planning.

Harman called the Metrorail-to-the-airport option "the revival of a dead concept" -- it has been studied and rejected at least three other times, the last in 2001.

Critics, including Harman, said the people mover would run every two minutes between the airport and the intermodal center, versus every six minutes, at best, for Metrorail.

Others said extending Metrorail to MIA would have forced architects to scrap complicated platform designs and disrupt carefully planned "pedestrian flows" between levels of the center where major construction could begin in a matter of weeks.

The latest findings appear to avert a potential fight over who would pay to shuttle people between MIA and the intermodal center: airline passengers or locals paying the half-cent sales tax for transportation.

Some Metrorail boosters and county officials were hoping to shift the project from the county aviation department onto Transit's books to help the airport contend with nearly \$1 billion in construction overruns at the North and South terminal projects.

But for now the project will continue to be paid by the airport, with approximately \$180 million in gate fees that the airlines pass along to ticket buyers and \$41 million in state grants.

Miami-Dade Transit engineers and their consultants with URS Corp. failed to return phone and e-mail messages seeking comment on the draft report.

The automated people mover would run from a new station at MIA between the Dolphin and Flamingo garages to the intermodal center. Travelers would walk directly off the people mover into the grand lobby of a \$440 million consolidated rental car center that would be built adjacent to LeJeune Road.

The eastern half of the intermodal center would be Miami's version of Grand Central Terminal -- a central station featuring restaurants, shops and perhaps office buildings and a convention hotel. Airport workers and city-bound tourists could connect with Tri-Rail, Amtrak, intracity buses, taxis, shuttles and Metrobuses.

The county, based on agreements signed in 1998, is obligated to finish the people mover within two years of the rental car center opening.

But with construction costs skyrocketing at the airport and the state falling behind on the rental car facility, nobody was rushing to select a people mover contractor even though the county started soliciting for competing teams more than two years ago.

At various points in the selection process, all three teams were disqualified. On Thursday, the selection committee announced that it wants to start negotiating with the last team to fall out of the running: Parsons Odebrecht Joint Venture.

The team includes the Sumitomo Corp., manufacturers of the trains that are supposed to run atop the new North Terminal, but are costing taxpayers \$7.6 million to mothball and "exercise" in Japan for at least six years.

At \$286 million, Parsons Odebrecht's final bid was \$65 million higher than the money available for the train.

If they can't reach agreement, the committee will then decide between the other two eliminated finalists -- Bombardier-PLC and Slattery Skanska.

The whole deal will likely wind up in front of county commissioners or an administrative hearing judge.

"Somebody's going to protest no matter what we do," said John Cosper, the airport's deputy director and chair of the selection committee.

Originally slated for completion in June 2004, construction on the 3,800-space rental car center is now tentatively set for late March or early April, with the center opening in October 2009.

Gary Donn, who oversees the intermodal center for the state, said negotiations are ongoing to close the \$140 million gap between the lowest bids and the state's construction estimates for the rental car facility.

"We're about 95 percent there," Donn said of the contract talks. "But if we had to tear up the station platforms or the elevators or anything else with this Metrorail option, it would have set us back some more."

Even if the train is no longer going into the airport, Transit is still moving forward with a \$523 million plan to extend Metrorail 2.4 miles from Earlington Heights to the intermodal center.