

Transit-tax rules likely to be loosened

County commissioners on Tuesday are poised to make sweeping changes over how they spend the scandal-plagued half-cent sales tax for transit.

By Larry Lebowitz

Miami-Dade County commissioners on Tuesday are expected to dramatically loosen the rules over the government's use of the half-cent local sales tax for transportation.

Proponents inside County Hall say the government needs the additional flexibility as Mayor Carlos Alvarez's administration continues "right-sizing" Miami-Dade Transit with fewer workers and less bus and rail service.

But opponents say the changes represent the last chapter in a "bait-and-switch" with voters who supported the sales tax expecting a massive expansion in rail and bus service, synchronized traffic lights, thousands of jobs and independent citizen oversight.

"It's going to be viewed as a money grab and a bait-and-switch. There's no way around it," said Paul Schwiep, a Miami lawyer and appointee to the neutered oversight panel, the Citizens Independent Transportation Trust.

\$900 MILLION

As a Miami Herald series pointed out last year, instead of "New Money for New Projects," the bulk of the \$900 million that has been generated to date has been spent on routine transit agency operations, higher salaries and to repair the underfunded problems of yesteryear.

Proponents, including Commission Chairman Dennis Moss and Transit Committee chairwoman Barbara Jordan, say the county has tried for more than six years to fulfill all of the promises of the 2002 campaign.

Moss said the county admitted its missteps at a highly unusual daylong "summit" in November and that now is the time to move forward with a more realistic set of expectations for future expansion.

The problem: The county still doesn't have enough money to operate and maintain the current system without raising fares and billions of dollars in additional taxes over the next 30 years.

A handful of transportation advocates have protested the changes. They are holding out faint hopes that someone will organize a referendum to repeal the tax. But nothing formal has surfaced to date.

If the measure is approved on Tuesday, the county would:

No longer be bound to complete the multibillion dollar list of rail, bus, road and public works projects in the People's Transportation Plan that voters approved in 2002.

No longer have to provide a painstaking accounting of how much sales-tax money is being used by the transit agency for everything from repair parts and bug-killing contracts to office rental payments.

Give the government a lot more flexibility in determining how to blend sales-tax revenues into the budgets of the transit agency and other county departments like public works, the 311 call center and the General Services Administration.

BIGGEST SHARE

The county receives 80 percent of the sales tax proceeds; this year, that works out to about \$144 million of \$180 million that will be collected.

The remaining 20 percent, or \$36 million, is shared by most of the municipalities on a per-capita basis.

Under the changes being considered on Tuesday, the county would be required to set aside at least 10 percent of its share for a capital-expansion fund before it could dedicate the remainder for transit operations.

But that 10-percent payoff comes with a hitch. The county only has to dump money into that expansion kitty after paying off all debt service obligations.

Critics say it will take years for this money to ever trickle down because the county has already sold hundreds of millions in bonds to repair the mistakes of yesterday -- many of which were never approved by voters.

And the debt-service load is will only rise over the next five years as construction begins on a 2.4-mile, \$526 million Metrorail spur linking Earlington Heights station with a new transit hub being built just east of Miami International Airport.

County sales taxes are going to cover 81 percent of the spur between Earlington Heights and Miami Intermodal Center; the balance is coming from the state. At this point, it is the only Metrorail line poised to be built.

Moss, Jordan and Alvarez have said that the county needs to lower expectations for other long-promised but still-unfunded expansion projects, including a new rail corridor along Northwest 27th Avenue through the heart of the black community and an East-West line from the airport to western suburbs.