

Rep. Mica: Dade needs to organize transportation needs and priorities

By Risa Polansky

With three federal funding programs working concurrently, Miami-Dade must organize its transportation needs and priorities, US Rep. John L. Mica, a Republican and ranking member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, told county commissioners last week.

In a meeting with Commission Chair Dennis Moss and Transit, Infrastructure and Roads Committee Chair Barbara Jordan, the Central Florida congressman outlined the three funding pots: the recently approved \$787 billion economic stimulus, which includes about \$46 billion for transportation projects; the year's regular appropriations; and a bill set to encompass transportation priorities for the next six years.

Mr. Mica, a former Miamian whose district stretches from north of Orlando to the Jacksonville city limits, pressed the county to create three "one-pagers" listing Miami-Dade's priorities for each of the programs.

He recommended the county distribute its requests among representatives and senators of both political parties.

Divide the projects up and try not to repeat requests, he advised, "to maximize your return."

Anticipating the stimulus package, County Mayor Carlos Alvarez in January sent Washington lawmakers an 11-page list of transportation and other projects in need of funding boosts.

He sent the same letter and list to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and minority leaders John Boehner of the House and Mitch McConnell of the Senate.

Mr. Mica several times throughout the meeting last week advised compiling "one-pagers."

He warned against requesting funding at the last minute, pressing for transparency in the earmark process and vowing to block eleventh-hour requests.

He pledged support to local projects — "The success of your efforts here really sets the model and the pattern for the rest of the state," he said — but later reminded commissioners that communities across the US are in need.

"I'm inundated [with requests] from throughout the country, and they're all rowing the same boat upstream," Mr. Mica said.

He expressed interest in several Miami-Dade projects, including airport connections, a north corridor transit link and a tunnel to the Port of Miami.

He called finishing the airport's over-budget and overdue new terminal "critical" and applauded recent progress on a Metrorail connection to the Miami Intermodal Center and a people mover from the center to the airport.

Though those projects are moving forward, plans for a northern Metrorail extension are stalled.

With Miami-Dade Transit floundering financially, the feds have questioned whether the county can maintain projects once built and are holding back necessary funding.

Elevated rail is pricey, Mr. Mica reminded the commissioners, advising the county take a look at what mode of transportation would be most effective for the needed northern line.

"You decide — it has to be cost effective. You can't have the Cadillac," he said.

Replied Ms. Jordan, "Right now, we don't even have a Volkswagen."

To help push projects forward, county officials had hoped the federal government would provide funding support not only for construction but also operations and maintenance of projects down the line.

Mr. Mica quickly closed that door.

Local governments will not receive operations and maintenance support from Washington, he said.

Throughout the meeting, Commissioner Jordan lamented how, over the years, project funding loads have shifted from the federal government to communities, which she said "forces the local community to go out and do additional taxation."

Mr. Mica said Miami-Dade has been good about going to the voters in the past, prompting Ms. Jordan to remind him: "we went to the voters — we overpromised."

The county for months has been struggling to right its financially troubled transit agency and to decide the future of the half-percent transit surtax voters approved in 2002.

It was promised as a source solely for new projects — too many, officials now admit.

The county transit department faces a multi-billion-dollar loss over the next 30 years in trying to deliver promised new projects while maintaining existing systems.

Elected leaders late last year apologized to voters for, as Ms. Jordan said, "overpromising" the transportation plan tied to the surtax.

Mr. Mica's reminded her "our money is limited, too."

He encouraged public/private partnerships and stressed the need for cost-effective project plans.

One local project Mr. Mica is on board for: a tunnel to the Port of Miami.

"That really should be done," he said.

To help fund such port enhancement and connectivity projects, the federal government is looking at imposing a cargo fee that would support the areas where it's collected, Mr. Mica said.

Funding has not been the issue with the tunnel project — cooperation with the Florida Department of Transportation has.

The tunnel had been moving until the state in December decided to shelve the project, citing concerns with the selected equity partner.

After uproar from local leaders, state officials have agreed to take another look at the \$1 billion-plus tunnel, but it's not a done deal.

At last week's meeting, the commissioners pleaded for help working with Stephanie Kopelousos, Department of Transportation secretary.

Mr. Mica said he'd already spoken with her and "she didn't even want me to bring it up" at the meeting with Miami-Dade commissioners.

But he plans to push, vowing that the project will be part of the bill outlining transportation priorities for the next six years.

"The tunnel, come hell or high water — we'll authorize that for the six-year."