

Metrorail breaks ground at airport

Construction is set to begin for a long-awaited expansion of Metrorail. But most of the promised rail lines remain highly unlikely.

By Matthew Haggman and Charles Rabin

Seven years after Miami-Dade voters approved a half-penny sales tax to significantly expand mass transit, ground was broken Friday on the first major rail project bankrolled by that effort: A long-sought Metrorail link to Miami International Airport.

The celebration announcing construction of the \$526 million, 2.4-mile rail line -- running from Earlington Heights station to the Miami Intermodal Center next to the airport -- marks the biggest milestone in the ongoing effort to create meaningful public transportation in Miami since Metrorail was started 25 years ago.

The Miami Intermodal Center will become a central transportation hub, linking airline, bus and rail travelers with a centralized rental car facility. It's expected to be operational by 2012.

But the Friday ceremony also served as a reminder of how voters were woefully over-promised by county leaders earlier this decade. The Earlington Heights project may well prove to be the only major Metrorail expansion produced from the tax.

In 2002 Miami-Dade County officials said the half-cent tax would deliver 88.9 miles of new rail lines crisscrossing the county as part of the People's Transportation Plan. The county also promised new buses, improved traffic signalization and roadway improvements.

Instead, nearly three-fourths of the \$900 million collected for new projects has been spent on inflated salaries, bloated staff and maintenance of existing operations. There is scant evidence the county will be able to do much more than the 2.4-mile connector, which starts construction Monday.

"I think it will be difficult," said Commissioner Katy Sorenson.

Commissioner Barbara Jordan, who chairs the subcommittee overseeing transit, said she's exploring public-private partnerships to pay for other promised rail lines, such as the long-proposed route to Miami Gardens or westward to Florida International University.

"Our challenge now is to creatively fund other corridors on a priority basis," said County Manager George Burgess, who said voters were over-promised in 2002.

The county's failure to fulfill its promises has prompted Commissioner Carlos Gimenez to sponsor legislation that would give voters the chance to repeal the half-penny tax.

“Government shouldn't fool people to get more revenue, and that's what Miami-Dade County did,” said Gimenez, who did not attend the Friday ceremony, but is expected to present his proposal at Tuesday's commission meeting.

Once completed, the Earlington Heights link will allow riders to go directly from points such as downtown Miami or the Brickell area to the airport. Riders starting in Hialeah and other stops along the north end of the line will have to transfer at Earlington Heights.

Foundation work for Miami Central Station, the Metrorail stop at the Miami Intermodel Center, is set to begin next week. The half-penny tax will pay for the majority of the \$526 million project, with the Florida Department of Transportation contributing \$100 million.

“This will be a signature project of the People's Transportation Plan,” said Harpal S. Kapoor, director of Miami-Dade Transit, who took over the troubled agency two years ago and sought cost savings. “My department will make this project a reality.”