



News Clip

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Push for Metrorail line resumes

Miami-Dade leaders must act quickly to improve finances in the transit agency if they want federal money to build a long-promised rail line.

BY MATTHEW I. PINZUR AND LARRY LEBOWITZ

Desperate to regain a shot at \$700 million in federal funding for expanded Metrorail service, Miami-Dade leaders promised Monday to quickly improve the county transit department's financial and operational plans.

"We're going to have to have not only great planning, but great action," said U.S. Rep. Kendrick Meek, D-Miami, who prodded the Federal Transit Administration to write a step-by-step plan last month for reviving the county's funding application.

The county's rating was downgraded earlier this year, prompting concern about its decades-old and often-deferred promise to run a North Corridor commuter train through the heart of Miami-Dade's black community.

Talk "was running rampant in the community ...that the county had abandoned the North Corridor in favor of the East-West Corridor," said County Commissioner Dorrin Rolle, chairman of the Transit Committee.

Those concerns were buttressed by the fact that the largely Hispanic West Dade suburbs are Mayor Carlos Alvarez's political base, and he faces reelection in August.

But Alvarez has never raised the possibility of swapping the order, and he and other county leaders have taken pains this spring to assuage those fears.

Expansion to the west, they have said, is two or three years behind the north line -- and its funding depends on whether they can prove themselves competent on the \$1.6 billion first project.

"The first thing I want to make clear is the mayor's absolute commitment to the Orange Line [North Corridor]," said County Manager George Burgess, who appeared on Alvarez's behalf at the morning news conference with Meek.

To get back into the running for federal funds, the transit administration said Miami-Dade must meet five milestones, beginning with an updated financial report by early June. Washington's downgrade of the project was based largely on questions of whether the county could afford maintenance of both the new line and its existing systems.

Balancing the books will almost certainly require new sources of money. Higher local gas taxes and increased bus and train fares could be tapped, and Rolle has scheduled a hearing for Wednesday to discuss those and other options.

"Our first commitment has to be to pass legislation to show that we can pay for it," said Commissioner Barbara Jordan, a longtime advocate of the Orange Line.

HIGH COSTS

The debate comes as transit continues to struggle with high costs and insufficient revenues. The commission is scheduled to vote Tuesday on a plan to cut nine bus routes and scale back seven others that have few riders. Those reductions would save \$8.3 million a year but face opposition from some commissioners and the powerful Transport Workers Union.

The union filed suit late Monday, seeking to block the cuts and restore other terminated bus routes. The lawsuit argues that scaling back service violates the People's Transportation Plan, a half-penny sales tax approved by voters in 2002 to expand transit.

"We're asking the courts to hold county officials' feet to the fire so that the commitment is kept -- a promise is a promise," said Mark Richard, a lawyer for the union, which represents more than 2,000 bus and train operators, mechanics, electricians and clerical staffers at Miami-Dade Transit. "There is no excuse that would allow for a bait and switch."

An Alvarez spokeswoman declined to comment, saying the administration had not reviewed the suit.

DOWNTOWN PROJECT

Monday's news conference on the train project was partially political, designed to keep public scrutiny on the new federal timeline. A few commissioners dropped hints that they might withdraw their support from Alvarez's massive downtown development project if the rail expansion collapses.

Rolle slyly praised Burgess for finding money for some of the downtown deal's major projects -- including the county's new performing arts center, an underwater tunnel to the Port of Miami and a new ballpark for the Florida Marlins. "I think that may be on hold right now," Rolle said of the ballpark.

Money for those projects are coming from a variety of special funds that could not legally be used for rail, but Rolle's implication was clear: The Alvarez administration knows how to find cash for large projects, even during a budget crisis.

"Wow, I know when I've been put in an interesting position," Burgess responded with a smile.