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1 888 838 5355**Miami Intermodal Center****News Clip**Miami Herald, Monday, May 23, 2005

STREETWISE**A lot of hopes are riding on new transit hub
BY LARRY LEBOWITZ**

This is one of those rare South Florida transportation stories with serious happy-ending potential.

It features political foresight, logic and bureaucracies setting aside competing agendas for the common good.

Really.

The \$1.4 billion Miami Intermodal Center will feature a consolidated rental car facility now under way east of Le Jeune Road, and a still-to-be-built Central Station where taxis, local and Greyhound buses, Metrorail and Tri-Rail will converge.

A lot of hope and tax dollars are riding on the center: It's supposed to dramatically reduce traffic congestion inside the airport and create a transit hub like nothing seen before in Florida.

Ten years from now, when the MIC is bustling with commuters, tourists and airport employees (and, hopefully, bearing a more interesting name) nobody will even notice how the decisions of 2005 spared them plenty of sweat and shoe leather.

Until recently, Metrorail and Tri-Rail passengers were going to have to trek more than 1,000 feet across moving walkways, bridges and escalators to catch a new \$260 million people mover into the airport. That's a long hike -- more than three football fields -- especially if you're lugging kids, suitcases or duffel bags stuffed with consumer electronics.

But under a new, improved scenario, Metrorail, Tri-Rail and the people mover will be located on different floors in the same general area, cutting walking distances down to approximately 200 feet.

"What we had before was the Miami *Not-So-Intermodal* Center," said City Commissioner Carlos Gimenez, chairman of the Transportation Committee. "Now, we truly have an intermodal facility -- everyone under the same roof and connecting at reasonable distances."

USER-FRIENDLY

Gimenez and other commissioners pushed engineers, planners and consultants with the Florida Department of Transportation, Miami-Dade Transit, Tri-Rail and the airport to concoct a more user-friendly solution.

In the new scenario, Tri-Rail will arrive at ground level. Two escalator levels up, Metrorail will arrive from the north via the Earlington Heights station off the Airport Expressway.

One more level up, outbound airline passengers will be able to catch the people mover into the airport. The people mover will drop them at the moving walkways located between the Dolphin and Flamingo parking garages.

Everybody wins in this scenario, starting with the passengers. The DOT can forge ahead with final design on Central Station, modeled after Manhattan's Grand Central Station. Tri-Rail no longer has to abandon its current station for a new one on the north side of 25th Street.

And as long as readers are willing to forget that it has taken Miami-Dade leaders a quarter-century to finally bring Metrorail into the community's No. 1 economic engine, Transit might be the biggest winner of all.

The new lineup provides wiggle room for Miami-Dade Transit to swing Metrorail out the south side of the MIC and over Le Jeune Road to the future east-west corridor.

This is the dream scenario: One train leaving Florida International University will run through the MIC and then up Northwest 27th Avenue toward Dolphins Stadium and the Broward County line. The next train also leaves FIU and passes through the MIC, but swings downtown on its way to Dadeland.

The rental car center is slated to open in 2007. The people mover and Central Station are scheduled to be ready in 2009, but the timetables are slipping for both elements. Transit is optimistically aiming to complete the MIC-Earlington Heights Metrorail spur in 2011.

SPEAKING OF THE MIC . . .

Rookie U.S. Sen. Mel Martinez tucked a key proviso into the six-year, \$295 billion transportation bill the Senate passed last week that could give Miami-Dade a huge boost toward financing Metrorail's north and east-west corridors.

Transit plans to build the 2.6-mile, \$340 million spur from Earlington Heights to the MIC with all local money: \$240 million, or 70 percent, from the half-cent sales-tax and the balance from a \$100 million state grant.

Because the spur is being built without federal money, the county is asking the feds to credit some of the state's contribution toward the financing for the other lines.

The county is trying to build the north and east-west corridors with 50 percent from the feds, 25 percent from the state and 25 percent from local sales-tax proceeds.

The exception Miami-Dade seeks is rare but not unprecedented. San Francisco and Las Vegas both received special permission to "credit" grants from one rail project toward financing for another seeking federal funds.

The Miami-Dade language is not contained in the version of the transportation bill the House passed in March. But Rep. Mario Díaz-Balart, R-Miami, has been shepherding support for it from key Transportation Committee chairs.

It's still unclear when the House and Senate leaders will appoint conferees to hash out the differences.

Got an idea for a future Streetwise column? Contact transportation writer Larry Lebowitz at streetwise@herald.com or call him at 305-376-3410.