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FIU, expressway authority to collaborate on transportation

BY RISA POLANSKY

To explore local transit improvements and alternatives, Florida International University is teaming up with the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority in a fledgling partnership aimed at changing over time the way Miamians get around.

"We have traffic congestion, we have some degree of mobility problems... so people are beginning to explore what are the options beyond just a rail system or the city block-by-city-block traditional bus system," said Tom Gustafson, director of government and transportation policy for the university's Lehman Center for Transportation Research and a former speaker of the Florida House of Representatives.

The university and expressway authority plan to explore it together in an at-least three-year partnership focused on developing bus rapid transit routes – potentially along State Road 836, the Dolphin Expressway – to connect the school's main campus with local destinations such as Miami International Airport and downtown Miami.

The partnership came about as officials recognized that the university offers research capabilities, the expressway authority has resources and jurisdiction over five local expressways, "and everybody's searching for a better answer to the congested highway system," Mr. Gustafson said. "And if it grows the economy, then all the better."

The idea eventually is to "cre-

'... everybody's searching for a better answer to the congested highway system.'

Tom Gustafson

pursue a three-year, up-to-\$500,000 partnership with the university.

But "We hope this could be a perpetual partnership with FIU," Mr. Lurigados said.

University leaders are to consider the concept early this month, with formal agreements anticipated in mid-August.

Through the planned partnership, university researchers are to explore bus rapid transit logistics and potential for advanced transit-oriented developments in the county.

Bus rapid transit uses buses or specialized vehicles in dedicated lanes or on roadways to speedily deliver riders to their destinations, almost like rapid transit, Mr. Gustafson said.

The vehicles stop less frequently than traditional buses – "if not non-stop, pretty near non-stop" – to make for quicker, more convenient trips.

Miami-Dade Transit, another public agency or a private partner could also get involved should plans move ahead.

An advanced transit oriented development, or advanced transit stop, "functions like an air-

believe me, they'll stay in their cars," he said.

The vision is to create such developments at the university campus and key points in the community, connected by bus rapid transit, to entice Miamians out from behind the wheel.

The first step: exploring a route between the university, 11200 SW Eighth St., and the now under construction Miami Intermodal Center at the airport, with links to downtown Miami and Miami Beach potentials for future.

Mr. Gustafson said he hopes not only to complete study and analysis; but to have at least the first leg running in the three years of the initial

agreement between the university and the expressway authority.

He predicts challenges both technical and business-related, such as designing the system, dealing with existing expressway traffic, and devising a way to generate profits or at least keep the project revenue-neutral – an expressway authority requirement.

"So there are a lot of questions to answer," he said. But that's the point of the planned research. "These are unique characteristics of this enterprise."

Other components, Mr. Lurigados said: tapping into the Lehman Center's expertise in bridge structures, as well as in

intelligent transportation systems, which incorporate information and communications technology.

"We're thinking of taking all these together and trying to sort through the ways in which you have to change the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority highway segments so they serve the multimodal purpose," Mr. Gustafson said.

The pairing benefits both parties, Mr. Lurigados said, offering university researchers a chance to dig into local transportation issues and allowing the expressway authority to explore new ground at about a third of the cost of hiring consultants.

He called it "a win-win."