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Tri-Rail station at MIA to close in weeks

Once hailed as the cornerstone of South Florida's transit future, Tri-Rail's Miami Airport Station will close soon to make room for a huge transit hub being built near MIA

By Alfonso Chardy

The nine members of the board that governs Tri-Rail agreed Friday to close the popular Miami Airport Station just east of Miami International Airport -- a move that upset some riders.

“What were they thinking?” said Leonardo Cabezas, who says he uses the train to visit relatives in Palm Beach County or after he arrives in Miami from a trip abroad. “I hope that when our new governor learns of this he will intervene.”

Officials are aiming for a March 11 closing date for the station.

Tri-Rail staff officials said the move is temporary while a huge \$1.7 billion transit hub is being built just east of MIA, next door to Tri-rail's Miami Airport Station.

However, that hub, known as Miami Intermodal Center or MIC, is not expected to be completed until 2013.

The closure is necessary to speed construction of the center. When it's done, an upgraded Tri-Rail station will reopen within the hub, Tri-Rail officials said.

If the station is not closed and demolished, construction of the MIC would be delayed by two years, officials say.

Closing the station marks a bit of an ironic milestone in Tri-Rail's history.

When the \$14.5 million station opened in 1998, then U.S. Secretary of Transportation Rodney Slater hailed it as the cornerstone of what was then merely a proposal to build the MIC.

Now that cornerstone will be demolished to make room for the intermodal center, which will connect various modes of transportation under one hub, including Tri-Rail, Metrorail, Metromover, Greyhound buses and rental cars.

An automated train known as the MIA Mover will carry passengers along an elevated track linking the center to the airport.

NO PAIN, NO GAIN

Tri-Rail passengers will be temporarily inconvenienced, but when the new station opens within the transit hub, the service will be much more efficient, said Joseph Giulietti, executive director of the South Florida Regional Transportation Authority.

Riders will have a choice of transit services, which could include Amtrak or even include a bullet train in the distant future.

“All major cities would like to have a central hub and have options,” Giulietti said.

Trying to build the MIC around the station would have been a costly logistical challenge, said Gus Pego, head of the Florida Department of Transportation office in Miami. Closing and removing it will expedite MIC construction and save FDOT millions.

“It's kind of like relocating a utility,” Pego said. “You're temporarily relocating the utility so you can do the work, and moving it back.”

The bigger benefit, he added, is completing the construction sooner and saving \$12 million to \$13 million to the taxpayer.

UNWELCOME NEWS

Still, some riders at the Miami Airport Station did not like the news Friday.

“I am not in agreement with the plan to shut down the station,” said Consuelo Merino, visiting from Ecuador, who was waiting on a train to West Palm Beach to visit friends and relatives.

“I think this station is very important for many people who arrive on flights, or are taking flights, or who live in Palm Beach and work at the airport.”

Robert Schierloh of Boca Raton said he takes the train on weekends to Miami to see his girlfriend.

Once the Miami Airport Station closes, the service will relocate to the Hialeah Market Station to the north.

From there passengers would board shuttle buses to reach MIA. Since passengers are already taking a shuttle from the Miami Airport Station to MIA, the change would add a little more time on their route, Pego said.

“Right now passengers get off at the Airport Station and shuttle,” he said. “So, it's just a few minutes more on the shuttle.”