



News Clip

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Provided by: Jenine Spoliansky, Kommunikatz, Inc.
jspoliansky@kommunikatz.com

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Drivers hit the brakes for road construction in S. Fla.

It's hard to travel far without hitting the brakes for road construction. In some cases it will continue for years.

By Alfonso Chardy

If it seems sometimes like most major roads in South Florida are under construction, that's because they are.

Most major expressways in Miami-Dade and Broward counties are undergoing some kind of construction. From the MacArthur Causeway near downtown Miami to Interstate 595 in Central Broward and from the Don Shula Expressway in South Miami-Dade to Dixie Highway at the Broward-Palm Beach County line, construction has caused rampant ramp and lane closures, often triggering angry complaints by motorists and business owners.

"It's a headache, especially on your way to work," said Sebastian Garcia, a Miami commuter interviewed in Little Havana. "Actually, I was in an accident because of the construction work." A few days ago, Garcia said, a driver rear-ended his car as traffic slowed on westbound State Road 836 — the Dolphin Expressway — near the junction with the Palmetto Expressway/State Road 826, where workers are rebuilding the interchange.

While many commuters echoed García's frustration, others said they were not too upset. "It doesn't bother me very much because I know it's getting better at the end of the day," said Ari Marko, interviewed while she filled her car's gas tank at a Shell station near Interstate 95 and Southwest Eighth Street in Miami.

The road work is the most significant since the reconstruction of Interstate 95 in the 1980s and '90s that included the addition of the carpool lanes that are now toll express lanes in Miami-Dade. Those express lanes will be extended north from the Golden Glades Interchange to Fort Lauderdale over the next few years.

The new work involves the overhaul of some of the most important roads in South Florida such as I-595, the interchange of the Palmetto and Dolphin expressways near Miami International Airport and the MacArthur Causeway, a key link to South Beach, where workers are preparing to bore a tunnel to the Port of Miami..

Some of the projects are among the most expensive and elaborate in Florida transportation history, involving an overall cost of more than \$4 billion. For example, the \$1.8-billion reconstruction of I-595 is the costliest road and bridge project ever let by the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT).

Brian Rick, an FDOT spokesman in Miami, said the port tunnel on the east and the Palmetto-Dolphin interchange on the west as well as a huge transportation hub under construction just east of MIA and an elevated truck roadway being built just west of MIA will benefit the airport and the port, Miami-Dade's two main economic engines.

"This area has grown by quantum leaps in terms of population and density," said Rick. "We're bolstering infrastructure, which is definitely one of the major goals of our department."

The projects that transportation officials hope will advance this strategy include the Port of Miami tunnel, the Miami Intermodal Center (MIC) central station, people mover, train and rental car hub just east of MIA, and the Northwest 25th Street Viaduct, the elevated truckway.

Phase one of the truckway from the Palmetto Expressway east to MIA is expected to open in July. Work on phase two from the Palmetto west to the Doral warehouse district could begin later this year.

In Broward, the centerpiece project is the I-595 overhaul, which involves construction of reversible electronic-collection toll lanes in the median. Already, the outline of the toll lanes is evident along stretches of the median, which previously was a long and wide strip of grass.

Now equipment and workers are shaping the median into the three lanes that by the summer of 2014 will carry traffic eastbound toward Fort Lauderdale in the morning and westbound in the afternoons and evenings.

The project, undertaken as part of a partnership between FDOT and a foreign company, also includes auxiliary lanes and sound barrier walls.

Another project being built as a public-private partnership is the \$1 billion Port of Miami tunnel, which will be bored from Watson Island on the MacArthur Causeway south to the port.

The next major milestone in the project is the expected arrival of the huge tunnel-boring machine in June. It will arrive in pieces and be reassembled in the median of the causeway across from Jungle Island. The project is scheduled to be completed in 2014.

While some might think the spike in road work stems from the 2009 \$787 billion federal economic stimulus program, the reality is that in South Florida only two major projects directly include some stimulus money: the \$558.2 million reconstruction of the interchange linking the Palmetto and Dolphin expressways in West Miami-Dade and the \$39.5 million Dixie Highway flyover at the Broward-Palm Beach County line. The flyover project is expected to be completed next year while the interchange might not be finished until 2015.

Reconstruction of the interchange and widening of the Palmetto from just north of Bird Road to just south of Miller Drive are the last two remaining phases of a years-long overhaul of State Road 826. The cost of the latest widening is about \$177 million, and is expected to be completed early next year.

The Palmetto improvements tie in with the widening of State Road 874, the Don Shula expressway, being done by the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority (MDX). Cindy Polo-Serantes, an MDX spokeswoman, said the \$65 million project between Kendall and Killian drives and Florida's Turnpike is expected to be completed by November.

Transportation officials are also performing work on several other significant projects that draw some of the loudest commuter complaints because they tie up traffic in and near downtown Miami.

One involves the overhaul of a stretch of Interstate 195 between I-95 and the Julia Tuttle Causeway at a cost of \$19.9 million. Another involves the reconstruction of a stretch of Biscayne Boulevard from Northeast 15th Street to Northeast 35th Terrace at a cost of \$16 million. A third features the repair of pavement and improvement of drainage on Brickell Avenue between Southeast 25th Road and Southeast Fifth Street at a cost of \$8.9 million.

The Biscayne Boulevard project is expected to be completed in August while the I-195 and Brickell projects are expected to reach completion in 2012.

In addition, workers are also continuing construction of the second-most-expensive transportation project in South Florida — the \$1.7 billion MIC, the transportation hub just east of MIA.

Once completed in 2013, the MIC will house under one roof a rental car center and a train station linking Metrorail, Tri-Rail, Amtrak as well as Greyhound and Miami-Dade Transit buses. It will be linked to MIA terminals via an automatic elevated train called MIA Mover.