



News Clip

BY LARRY LEBOWITZ llebowitz@MiamiHerald.com Thursday, March 27, 2008

Panel rejects plan to buy new Metrorail cars

A citizens oversight group is throwing a major wrench into Miami-Dade County's controversial plan to spend \$345 million in sales-tax proceeds to buy 136 new Metrorail cars that the county failed to properly overhaul nine years ago.

The vote late Wednesday night by the Citizens Independent Transportation Trust further muddies an already uncertain future for two long-promised Metrorail expansions, along Northwest 27th Avenue into the heart of the black community, and into the largely Hispanic western suburbs.

The trust voted 6-5 to reject the county's desired amendment to the sales-tax spending plan to buy the new rail cars.

"We've drawn a line in the sand with the county on this one," said trust member Marc Buoniconti. "We're telling them that they can't keep looking to the CITT and the surtax as a cash cow."

Critics have said Miami-Dade's plan to use local sales tax proceeds to rehab or replace the original rail cars would have pulled a "bait and switch" with voters who supported the sales tax in 2002. Voters were pitched the tax on the premise that new revenue would pay for new service.

Instead, those critics say, the new money is being used to repair old problems, like the long overdue midlife rehab of the rail cars, a project that was never disclosed during the campaign.

The vote also throws a major wrench into the county's long-range plans for the so-called Metrorail Orange Line, which includes three linked projects:

- The 2.4-mile, \$526 million spur from Earlington Heights station into the Miami Intermodal Center near Miami International Airport.
- The proposed 9.5-mile, \$1.6 billion North Corridor, running along Northwest 27th Avenue to the Broward County line.
- The proposed 10- to 13-mile, \$2.2 billion East-West Corridor, running from the intermodal center to the western suburbs near Florida International University.

The only line that is a certainty at this point is the MIC/Earlington Heights spur because it is the only one that is being built without matching federal funds.

Early Thursday, county managers and attorneys were still trying to sort out the confusing, cascading consequences from Wednesday night's CITT vote.

"This makes it much more difficult to secure the federal funding to move the Orange Line along," said Assistant County Manager Ysela Llort.

County managers and Transit agency leaders are facing several serious political, financial and operational binds.

Last week, they convinced county commissioners to throw out more than \$9 million in consultant fees and staff time and reject all bids to finally perform the midlife overhaul of the original Metrorail cars that should have occurred in 1999.

Now county leaders don't have a contract to rehab the originals, which were designed to run for 30 years as long as they were overhauled by the 15th year of ridership, nor do they have permission to use sales tax proceeds to buy new ones.

While public safety was never endangered, the county is only now acknowledging that it never adequately funded the transit agency nor set aside enough money to complete the midlife rehab.

"The county and MDT have been making mistakes for decades -- they didn't properly take care of those cars and now they want to come to the CITT and look at the sales-tax as a cash cow," Buoniconti said. "We're not going to let them do it."

At the same time, county leaders are facing a serious political problem in parts of the black community, which has been waiting for the North Corridor since the original line was planned in the 1970s.

In February, federal transportation regulators downgraded the North Corridor to a level where it no longer qualifies for up to \$700 million in matching federal construction funds.

One of the leading causes for the downgrade: Federal analysts said the county has not come close to adequately setting aside enough long-range money to maintain and modernize the existing transit system, much less cover the expense of an expanded Metrorail system if the Orange Line is built.

The feds estimate the budgetary shortfall at close to \$1.1 billion over a 30-year period.

Transit Director Harpal Kapoor said the agency was hoping to submit a shored-up financial plan by late summer in hopes of restoring the North Corridor rating early next year.

Some black leaders fear the county is purposely trying to scuttle the North Corridor and divert those funds to the proposed East-West line.

Mayor Carlos Alvarez has repeatedly said the county is committed to building the entire Orange Line, and the North Corridor remains in front of the East-West.