

Posted on Mon, Oct. 01, 2007

Dade's 30-year road plan is paved with dreams

BY LARRY LEBOWITZ

The auditorium overflowed with dreamers in finely tailored suits and nice haircuts -- road builders and lobbyists, engineers and economists, bond salesmen and bankers.

They dreamed on a giant scale, crafting a vision for what the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority network of toll roads might look like 30 years, and \$8 billion, from now.

It's easy to dream in a vacuum. Nobody plays racial and ethnic politics in the vacuum. Environmentalists aren't trying to "hold the line" on the Urban Development Boundary in a vacuum.

They tossed out a lot of big ideas, touching all corners of the community. A few even crossed county lines, improving the options for tens of thousands of people who live in southwest Broward and toil in Miami-Dade. This category includes:

Extending the Gratigny Parkway (State Road 924) at both ends. The expressway would continue eastward from its current terminus at Northwest 32nd Avenue all the way to Interstate 95, and from its western end at the Palmetto Expressway and Interstate 75 over to Florida's Turnpike.

Converting U.S. Highway 27 into a new expressway from the Palmetto northwest to the turnpike and Krome Avenue. The idea is to provide another major access route from the far southwest Broward suburbs west of I-75.

While all the projects will face immense political opposition, the next two on the list are proven powder kegs:

A "north-south" connector that puts a new name on the Central Parkway proposal that was killed by black community leaders in 2004 because of widespread fears that it would destroy established neighborhoods.

The connector would divert some traffic away from I-95, 25 blocks to the east. It would run basically from the Airport Expressway (State Road 112) north toward Opa-locka Airport and the Palmetto.

The Southwest Extension of State Road 836 (the Dolphin Expressway). This veritable West Kendall mini-beltway has been on the long-range drawing boards, in various forms, for years.

It will spark a donnybrook that pits home builders and land speculators against environmentalists and existing neighborhoods over the future placement of the UDB.

The Dolphin would extend farther west -- to 157th Avenue? Krome? -- and then south, behind Kendall-Tamiami airport, before circling back east toward State Road 874 (the Don Shula Expressway) around 136th Street.

Another smaller project would start to close that loop from the other direction:

The creation of new ramps that would carry cars to and from the southern end of the Don Shula Expressway over the turnpike onto 136th Street.

ALONG U.S. 1

Two other projects would try to reduce congestion along South Dixie Highway/U.S. 1:

The addition of variably priced tolls to a revamped version of the Busway between Dadeland South and Florida City. The problem: the only way to make this attractive for toll-paying customers would be to elevate U.S. 1 over all the major intersections.

That screaming you hear? That's the thousands of deep-pocketed, politically powerful homeowners from Pinecrest to Palmetto Bay spitting coffee and cornflakes through their noses this morning.

An attempt to squeeze a new, reversible-flow express lane between Kendall Drive and I-95 that would create more capacity northbound in the mornings and southbound at night.

And then there's a novel idea with an economic development twist that is being developed for MDX by Robert Poole, director of transportation research studies at the Reason Foundation:

A truck-only tollway that links the Port of Miami, the airport, the FEC freight rail yard and Medley cargo areas. Poole, who lives in Plantation, is expected to release his report later this year.

The MDX board will be sifting through all of the dream projects over the next six months before they are submitted to the Metropolitan Planning Organization for inclusion in the 2035 long-range plan.

THREE HAVE A SHOT

MDX Executive Director Javier Rodriguez thinks three of the projects could have a legitimate shot at gaining momentum in a short time-frame.

Rodriguez likes the new interchange at the southern end of the Don Shula, the variably

priced tolls on U.S. 1 from Florida City to Dadeland and extending the Gratigny from the east and the west.

Rodriguez isn't naive. All the options will be difficult. All require more tolls.

"Whatever we do, it's going to require a lot of political will and backbone," said former mayor and current MDX board member Maurice Ferré. "It needs to be a conversation about mobility and decongesting this community. A real conversation about the quality of life."

Do you have a commuting question or an idea for a future column? Contact Larry Lebowitz at streetwise@MiamiHerald.com or call him at 305-376-3410 or 954-764-7026, ext. 3410.

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