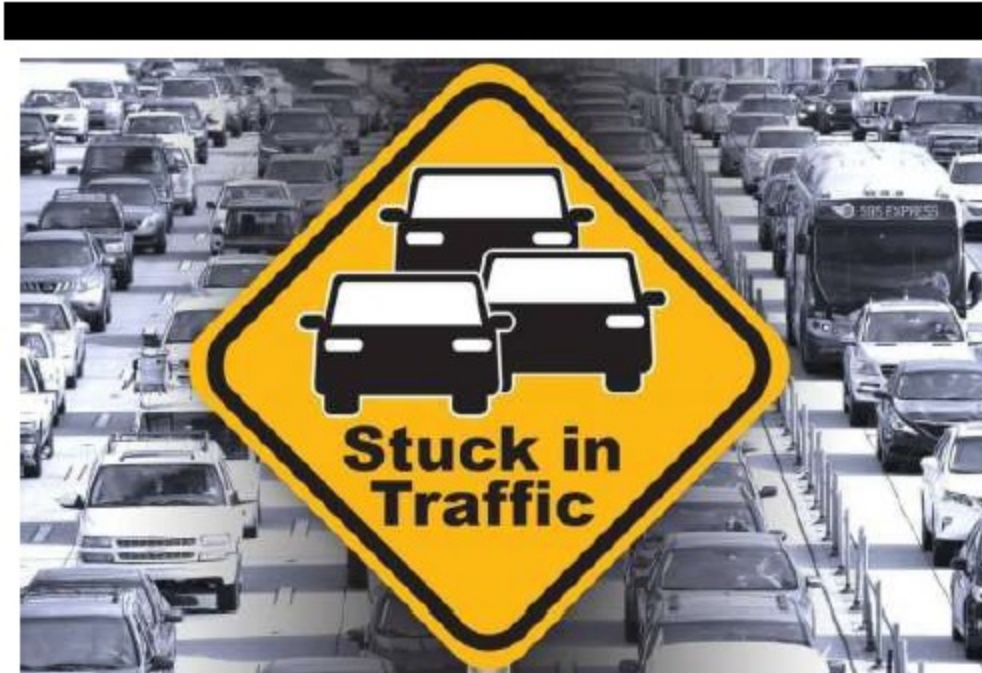


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## No way out: For drivers caught in gridlock, little relief down the road



Vehicles come to a standstill on I-95 northbound between the Northwest 135rd Street and 151st Street exits during rush hour. CARL JUSTE MIAMI HERALD STAFF

BY ANDRES VIGLUCCI

Veteran Miami-Dade urban planner Subrata Basu, a longtime advocate of smart growth, retired and went to Belize for three years with the Peace Corps, then got a heck of a shock when he settled back home last August.

The traffic! As if it hadn't been bad enough when he left for Central America, it now seemed 10 times worse. Basu, 70, began working at a non-profit in North Miami Beach for a small stipend, but the 90-minute rush-hour drive each way from his home in South Miami was brutal. So he quit.



The northbound Palmetto Expressway during the morning traffic commute near the 836 interchange. | C.M. GUERRERO EL NUEVO HERALD

"It was too much," Basu said, lamenting a local transportation landscape that gives people few good alternatives to the car. "Even if you want to do something about it, what can you do?"

The traffic! Everywhere you go in Miami-Dade County, at nearly any time of the day, you run into it. Wherever people get together -- at work, in school, at a party or poolside on South Beach -- it's sometimes all anyone can talk about. Slow, exasperating, often backed up for no apparent reason, Miami-Dade's streets, roads and highways are so clogged with cars and trucks that any happenstance — a downpour, road repairs, a fender-bender — can turn a commute into a nightmare or the most routine of errands into a white-knuckle stress test.

Anyone who has lived in Miami-Dade more than a few years can tell the stock-in-trade anecdote: It used to take 20 minutes to drive from home to work. Now? It can take 35 or 40 — or who knows?

For many, the sheer unpredictability and the sense of impotence is the worst part of it. It used to be rush hour was dependably bad, but other times were clear sailing. Now there's no telling how long a car trip will take, be it mid-morning or mid-afternoon or even in the evening. Doral to downtown Miami? Could be 20 minutes, could be 45. Heading back? Might take 90.

"Everybody says that to me," said Nancy Lee, who writes for the Eye on Miami blog. "They know the numbers to the minute. That's how they quantify traffic. They used to be resigned, but it's gotten to be too much time out of their lives. It's unacceptable.

"My husband, all he talks about when we're in traffic is traffic, and how crazy the drivers are. I just can't stand it any more."

You're not imagining it. Studies of congestion in Miami-Dade show it's been getting steadily worse, especially since the end of the Great Recession. The population is growing, more people are working, tourists are flocking all over and developers in resurgent neighborhoods in and around downtown Miami, Brickell and Miami Beach are building like mad. They're not just bringing in thousands more people, along with their cars, to narrow urban streets that couldn't handle the traffic before; they're also exacerbating bottlenecks as they close lanes and streets to replace old sewer and water lines or accommodate multi-block mega-projects. And there's much more of that to come.

Though highways in Broward County can get backed up at peak times, congestion in Miami-Dade area is consistently rated among the very worst in the nation and has become a hot-button political issue, with elected leaders for the first time in years issuing calls for transit expansion. Some have even questioned the spending of hundreds of millions of dollars on road projects, like the seemingly unending reconstruction of the Palmetto and Dolphin expressway interchange, instead of on mass-transit alternatives that could broaden transportation options.

### NO RELIEF

But don't look for real relief anytime soon.

Planners and experts say traffic congestion is likely with us for good. Take the staggering cost of both road and rail-transit construction, operations and maintenance at a time when transportation funding is severely strained, add the simple lack of room for highway expansion, and it means long-suffering Miamians won't soon see much beyond limited extensions to toll expressways and tech tweaks that squeeze more capacity out of existing roads. Those include the toll lanes the Florida Department of Transportation is installing on all its interstate highways at a cost of billions, and, possibly, intelligent traffic signals now being tested that can react to real-time congestion to reduce backlogs at major intersections.

A \$400 million reconstruction of the Dolphin/State Road 836 east of the Red Road exit that's about to get underway will squeeze in an extra lane each way, but otherwise forget about adding lanes or widening highways. Even if it were feasible, experts say, it doesn't work. More lanes only invite more driving — and quickly reach saturation again.

"The latent demand on 836 is so great, I could put in eight lanes in each direction and they would fill up," said Miami-Dade Expressway Authority (MDX) executive director Javier Rodriguez. "But is it the right thing to do? How do you get rid of congestion? You don't. You manage it."

To meet the expected needs of Miami's motorists over the next few years, MDX would require about \$6 billion, Rodriguez said. Thanks to a controversial expansion of tolling on the Dolphin and Airport expressways, he said, the independent public agency will have around \$900 million, enough for the 836 project and short extensions of the Gratigny and Shula expressways. That's not enough to build its most ambitious, and likely controversial, idea, now being studied: extending 836 south to West Kendall along the county's Urban Development Boundary.

Miamians hoping for alternative means of transportation, in particular rail transit, should not get their hopes up substantially, either.

Miami-Dade's transit agency is about to place its big bet for the future on premium bus service, including three express bus routes that will begin running around 2017 on the Dolphin Expressway.

If studies pan out, the agency will also introduce Bus Rapid Transit: buses that act like trains, running in dedicated lanes and stopping at raised mini-stations for fast boarding, but at a small fraction of the cost of rail. The BRTs, which can carry more passengers than rail if run frequently enough, could operate someday soon along Flagler Street, Kendall Drive and Northwest 27th Avenue, all corridors once slated for Metrorail lines.

But there is no serious talk of Metrorail expansion, although Miami-Dade commissioners have asked the county's transportation planners to look at piggybacking on the privately owned CSX freight-train line that runs along the Dolphin. A revived, \$532 million plan to build a light-rail link between Miami and Miami Beach, meanwhile, faces an steep uphill path to fruition; assuming it proves viable, it would be a decade away. It's a similar story with the so-called Tri-Rail Coastal Link, which supplement the existing line by adding service on the FEC tracks to the east.

### COST OF SUCCESS

How did we come to this pass?

Traffic congestion is a deep cut from a double-edged sword: It means people want to be here, the local economy is expanding, investors are pumping in money, and Greater Miami is thriving like never before.

"There's nothing sadder than a city where there is no congestion and all the roads are A-rated," said David Henderson, the bicycle and pedestrian planner for the Miami-Dade Metropolitan Planning Organization, the agency in charge of overall transportation planning for the county. "That's a place that's been bypassed. There are a lot of issues with congestion. But it also means something positive."

Yet it's also as though an instant 21st Century global metropolis is being superimposed on a town that, transportation-wise, was nowhere near ready for it.

And there are untold costs: to business, to family, to the climate, to health and to nervous systems, experts say.

That's the result, critics say, of decades of transportation planning and investment that focused overwhelmingly on cars and roads, and that encouraged suburban sprawl while stinting on mass transit. Predictably, most Miami-Dade residents are utterly dependent on the private automobile as the one way of getting around.

"We all were built out at a time when there was less traffic and no need to control our sprawl," said Mitchell Bierman, a lawyer and chair of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce's transportation committee. "Then it got to the point we were very sprawled out and we found there were a lot more cars we ever thought we would see, and it's taking forever to get anywhere."

Miami-Dade's constrained public transit system, meanwhile, is notoriously inefficient and short in reach, serving only a fraction of the county's population.

### 'MASS' TRANSIT

Miami-Dade's single, 25-mile-long Metrorail line, which stretches from Dadeland to just west of Hialeah, was once meant to be the spine of a county-wide network financed by a half-percent sales tax approved by voters in 2002. But most of the money went to filling in deep holes in the transit operating budget, and the system was expanded only once — with a new spur to Miami International Airport. Though Metrorail carries tens of thousands of passengers a day, mostly between Dadeland and downtown Miami and ridership is rising on the companion Metro mover that loops around downtown, Brickell and the Omni district, the Metro system's reach remains sorely limited.

The county's bus system, with 93 routes and 824 buses, is cumbersome and unreliable, and used mostly by people who have no other choice, either because they don't drive or are among the 11 percent of the county population that doesn't own a car. The unreliability is due in part to the fact that the buses get stuck in traffic along with everyone else, and because it's costly and difficult to serve spread-out suburbs, experts say.

That means that hundreds of thousands of residents of vast, low-density suburbs spreading south and west into the Everglades who work in the county's principal employment centers — an east-west band stretching from Doral to Miami Beach — today have little practical recourse but to drive on a network of overburdened highways and arterials that we can barely afford to maintain, let alone significantly expand. Their mind-numbing commute times can now extend well beyond an hour each way.

"These are some very angry people," said Maurice Ferre, a former Miami mayor and Miami-Dade commissioner who sits on the MDX board and the Florida Transportation Commission.

Some numbers make the imbalance clear. There are 1.9 million registered vehicles in Miami-Dade. That's double the entire county population in the 1960s, when the Dolphin Expressway was built. Miami-Dade transit serves some 360,000 people a day. The Dolphin and four other toll highways managed by the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority alone handle some one million vehicles a day. Fully 90 percent of Miami-Dade commuters get to work by car.

Persuading more people to leave their cars at home has long been the goal of transit advocates. But converting them will require transit alternatives that are convenient, comparable in out-of-pocket cost and faster than taking the car. Advocates say the county transit system could do much more.

There's plenty of pent-up demand for alternate transportation, they note, especially among the 20-somethings flocking to reinvigorated urban neighborhoods like Wynwood and Brickell. In the absence of major new transit projects, municipal officials in cities like Miami, Miami Beach, Coral Gables and Pinecrest, among others, have taken the lead in implementing low-cost, local alternatives encouraging mixed-use development, pedestrian- and cycling-friendly street plans and deploying the proliferating trolley buses financed by their share of the half-percent transit tax.

Public officials and advocates are also working to convert the M-Path under the Metrorail line along U.S. 1 and an abandoned FEC rail line from Dadeland to the airport dubbed the Ludlam Trail into cycling routes suitable for commuting or short trips by bike.

But there's also a need for big transit improvements that can carry thousands of people across the county, advocates say. BRT could do that, they note. So would filling in gaps in the existing system, like making it easier for people to reach Metrorail stations without a car. That might require ensuring that buses, in particular those serving the South Dade Busway, be coordinated to meet arriving trains at the Dadeland South station, something that now doesn't happen.

Bierman, who often takes Metrorail and the busway from downtown Miami to Pinecrest and Cutler Bay city halls, where he serves as city attorney, says he's typically forced to wait prolonged periods for the bus.

"You expect a seamless transition. It doesn't work that way. It's not rapid. It's not fast enough," he said. "If we had a system where there is at least some heavy rail and a continuation using BRT or light rail, then you begin to have something that looks like a system that allows people to get from place to place without sitting for hours in traffic."

Rail-transit advocates like Bierman are feeling hopeful for the first time in years. Elected officials, including the mayors of Miami and Miami Beach and Miami-Dade Commissioners, are pushing hard for rail and exploring alternative financing, including public-private partnerships like the one that built the PortMiami Tunnel, and perhaps siphoning off toll revenue from MDX, an idea the agency is fighting.

"Everybody here sees the need for this," Bierman said. "We need this desperately now."

But others, like Ferre, are not sanguine. Transportation in Miami-Dade, critics say, has been hampered because it's planned and run by a Balkanized hodge-podge of often-competing agencies. Although the **Metropolitan Planning Organization** is ostensibly in charge of coordination, Ferre said, it's failed to make hard decisions and lacks the power to enforce them. In any case, he argues, pursuing unaffordable rail projects will not likely bear fruit, he says.

"Who's the boss? How are decisions made? Tell me, what transportation solutions have been done in Miami-Dade County in the last 30 years?" Ferre asked, before answering his own question with a shrug.