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## Outlook 2017

# Congestion likely to dominate '17

BY CATHERINE LACKNER



Bringing Metrorail down to street level could see it extended from the Broward County line to South Dade.

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Throughout 2016, traffic congestion ranked high among most Miamian's concerns, and it is likely to be a dominant theme in 2017 too, sources say.

Some improvements have already begun, said Mitch Bierman, partner-in-charge at the Weiss Serota Helfman Cole & Bierman law firm and chair of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce's Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.

He cited the EZ Pay system, by which Metrorail riders can see routes, pay their fares and add funds to their accounts, as one of the advances. "Before, you had to go to a kiosk in a station and pay in person," he said. "Now, you can plan and pay for your trip all at once."

A smartphone app with real-time communication that lets passengers track a train, trolley or bus is another significant improvement, he said. "You can be in your office and know how much time you have to get to the train," which saves time and might encourage more people to use transit, he said.

"A third thing that's in process is traffic-signal coordination," he said, which is already in use in some corridors and will eventually spread throughout the county. The new traffic lights include sensors to recognize congestion, adjust the signal's timing and broadcast a message to other traffic signals. The signals can sense when a bus approaches and allow extra time for it to clear an intersection "so that they can move faster on all routes," Mr. Bierman said.

The shoulders of major highways have been reinforced so that express buses can use them, he said. "Buses – and only buses – can pass traffic that's in the regular lanes," he said.

"We're buying new buses with clean natural gas technology, and a request for proposals has been issued for electric buses. They're very nice, fuel-efficient, and people enjoy using them. They look different, like

people who might not ordinarily ride a bus."

Last year, the Metropolitan Planning Organization introduced the Strategic Miami Area Rapid Transit plan, which targets six corridors – Miami Beach, east-west, Kendall, North, Northeast and South Dade – for traffic improvements. Progress on all corridors is to occur at the same time.

Alice Bravo, director of the county's Transportation and Public Works Department, announced a plan to extend Metrorail along the North (Northwest 27th Avenue) and the South (US 1 south of Dadeland) corridors by bringing it down to street level for those segments.

"I think that's a very viable first option, because it would extend Metrorail from the Broward line to South Dade," Mr. Bierman said. "We can roll the existing stock to grade, and the right-of-way is already there."

But he stressed that all corridors should move forward at the same time, and transportation advocates should be poised to jump on opportunities. "The right step is the first step we can take," he said.

Public-private partnerships, including transit-oriented development, are often the way to get a transportation project funded and built, observers say.

"The private sector looks at things through a business lens," said Rey Melendi, chief operating officer of 13th Floor Investments, which is involved in two high-profile transit-oriented projects: the Link at Douglas and Motion at Dadeland.

"Government does a good job of identifying the need, how much capital will be needed, and all the things that go into analysis. But the private sector is more nimble than government, which has more bureaucracy that can take a very long time to expedite."

Land along the Metrorail has been underutilized, he said, and has potential not only for housing, but also for office space and retail uses. "I don't know how much the private

Melendi said. "But if government partners with the private sector to create these kinds of developments, it would increase ridership, along with revenues. It's mutually beneficial for both the government and the developer."

Looking ahead, "I think Miami-Dade County is beginning to turn a corner," he said. "The transit team has been laser-focused on solutions and they are thinking like business people. I'm very encouraged."

"There are not going to be any overnight solutions," said Neal Sklar, a partner in the Peckar & Abramson law firm who in 2015 organized "The P3 Pipeline: A Forum for the Private Sector," which focused on public-private partnerships, or P3s.

The Strategic Miami Area Rapid Transit plan offers alternatives for each corridor, "and P3s can help make them a reality," Mr. Sklar said.

Miami Beach appeared to be pursuing a public-private partnership for its own light rail, but late last year Mayor Philip Levine put the brakes on the project until Miami-Dade County approves the connection to Miami Beach across the MacArthur Causeway.

"Miami Beach decided to pull back on the throttle because it doesn't make sense to go it alone," he said, and he believes Mayor Levine will stick by that stance, at least in the near term.

Regardless of the way the Miami-to-Miami Beach connection eventually shapes up, there might be multiple revenue streams available if the private sector gets involved, Mr. Sklar said.

The county could offer naming rights for the service, transit cars could be wrapped in LED light screens offering advertising and news bulletins, a builder could attempt a transit-oriented development along the route or near it, or a combination of methods could emerge.

"There is also state and federal money available, but it's a process that takes time," he said. Putting a financing package together "is usually a stew, and both sides have to