

# South Florida's gridlock impacts workers, businesses and tourism

BY JOSEPH A. MANN JR.

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Every workday, tens of thousands of South Florida commuters take to highways and expressways, moving south from Broward and Palm Beach counties to jobs in Miami-Dade County, or north from Miami-Dade to workplaces sometimes 50 miles or more away from their homes.

Columns of trucks also move cargo along these routes, connecting the region's airports and seaports with warehouses and commercial and industrial clients.

All share one thing in common: gridlock. And lots of it.

This great ribbon of humanity and merchandise generally follows main corridors like I-75, I-95, I-595, Florida's Turnpike, and the Palmetto and Dolphin expressways in Miami-Dade – some of the most congested highways in the nation.

Accidents during morning or afternoon rush hours can easily turn a normal one-hour commute into a hellish two hours or more, as cars, trucks and buses idle their engines in a long, undulating parking lot on our highways.

These traffic woes are not just an annoyance to commuters. They can impact productivity in the workplace due to lost work hours and stressed-out employees, and raise the cost of transporting goods on trucks that miss delivery deadlines. Businesses have taken note and are scrambling to find solutions to the traffic challenges that impact their bottom lines.

"[There's] a growing awareness that the current situation isn't sustainable," said attorney Mitchell Bierman, a partner with Weiss Serota Helfman Cole & Bierman in Coral Gables and an expert on transportation and infrastructure. "We can't build expressways wide enough to accommodate all cars and allow people to move from place to place in a reasonable amount of time. This is having an impact on business, tourism and our prosperity."

## Miami-Dade is the root

At the core of South Florida's burgeoning congestion problem sits Miami-Dade, home to more than 2.7 million people – almost half of the 6 million living in the tri-county area – and more than 1 million registered vehicles.

Miami-Dade is also one of the country's largest international trade and logistics centers, supporting tens of



A familiar scene at rush hour on South Florida's Interstate 95.

JOCK FISTICK



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**ATTORNEY MITCHELL BIERMAN**, partner, Weiss Serota Helfman Cole & Bierman

thousands of jobs and moving a massive volume of cargo through PortMiami and Miami International Airport each year.

Miami is consistently rated among the worst U.S. cities for commuting and traffic jams. A 2015 study done by the American Highways Users Alliance said that three of the nation's 50 worst traffic bottlenecks were on stretches of the Palmetto and Dolphin expressways, which are main routes, not only for commuters, but also for cargo.

Alice Bravo is director of the Miami-Dade County Department of Transportation and Public Works, Florida's largest transit agency and the 15th-largest in the nation. While her area of responsibility covers Miami-Dade and its 34 municipi-

palities, her planning and operations impact traffic movement in Broward and Palm Beach counties.

"The primary issue we face stems from the distances people have to commute and our ability to provide transit options that are faster and/or more convenient than using automobiles," Bravo said. "We need to be able to attract people to public transportation by making it clean, safe, reliable and convenient."

It's a tough sell, as South Floridians often bemoan the lack of viable tri-county mass-transit alternatives.

On an average workday, a staggering 95 percent of the region's commuters travel to their jobs in a car, according to the Miami-Dade Metropolitan Planning

Organization. So converting the region's car culture into one supporting public transit options is no easy task.

For example, despite Miami-Dade's extensive public transportation system – which includes a Metrobus fleet that covers most of the county; Metrorail, which links to the Tri-Rail line that runs to Broward and Palm Beach counties; and its free Metromover rail in Miami – it only handles about 350,000 daily boardings. Even with campaigns aimed at attracting new riders, people prefer to drive to work.

Express lanes – for which users are charged variable tolls – have apparently not convinced drivers it's cheaper to take the bus or train to work, but the

state continues to add them to major expressways. On a recent morning, the I-95 express toll from the Golden Glades Interchange south to Miami was \$10.

## Easing traffic key to business

Tackling commuter issues is a top priority of many businesses, which acknowledge the negative impacts of gridlock on employees' efficiency and worker retention.

More South Florida companies now stagger work hours and appointment times or allow employees to work from home one or two days a week to compensate for chronic traffic delays, said Marjorie Kean, managing director of Diversified Search in Miami.

"But not all companies allow that," she added, as some workers need to be in the office "even if the boss is not."

Traffic congestion is also a factor for companies looking to enter or expand in the tri-county market, Kean said. Some multinational companies are looking at alternative sites in Broward where there is a strong workforce, commuting is easier to manage, and leasing costs are cheaper than Miami-Dade, she added.

According to the Greater Fort Lauderdale Alliance, a public-private economic development organization that promotes new investment and jobs in Broward, 21 companies relocated or expanded operations in the county in fiscal year 2013-2014, creating more than 1,400 high-value jobs and making investments of more than \$267 million.

Over the last several years, the total number of companies was more than 120, according to the alliance.

It's not clear if any of the relocations came from Miami-Dade, but some new investors looked at Miami and other cities before making a decision, officials said.

## What's being done?

For years, South Florida counties, cities, the Florida Department of Transportation and the federal government have tried to better accommodate cars and trucks.

They built new roads, widened existing ones and carried out major projects, like improvements on I-95 and other highways and building the massive exchange at the intersection of the Palmetto and Dolphin expressways that's used by over 430,000 vehicles daily. They also constructed the PortMiami tunnel and are completing the Northwest 25th Street Viaduct to facilitate the massive flow of tractor-trailers in and out of MIA.

Planners are also looking at a variety of long-term solutions, including developing more exclusive corridors for rapid-transit buses, and possibly a light-rail connection along the most congested routes.

Another possibility is bringing Tri-Rail into downtown Miami. But this project seems to be dead due to a lack of legislative support in Tallahassee, according to sources outside the transportation department. And an expansion of Metrorail is also viewed as too costly.

A private company, All Aboard Florida, is developing a passenger rail line that is scheduled to begin service between West Palm Beach and Miami by late 2017.

Some areas, such as Coral Gables and downtown Miami, employ trolleys to ease traffic. More counties are also using technology, such as apps that alert drivers to traffic problems or provide traffic-free routes, to avoid gridlock.

Officials also are studying other areas that have successfully coped with traffic congestion.

Last year, Miami-Dade officials visited Denver, which over time built 122 miles of new commuter rail and light rail, developed 18 miles of rapid-transit bus lines,

added 21,000 new parking spaces at light rail and bus stations, and improved bus service to provide easy bus/rail connections across the eight-county district – an ambitious and expensive set of projects.

"This program was implemented through joint development and public-private partnerships," Bravo said. "Some of the most important lessons from that visit were that they developed their projects one segment at a time, and they always stayed on course – no matter the difficulties they faced in completing their projects."

## A political perspective



Esteban Bovo Jr.

Miami-Dade Commissioner Esteban Bovo Jr., chairman of the commission's Transportation and Mobility Committee, underscored the need to make real progress in offering better alternatives.

"One of the biggest problems we have is that whenever we address a solution to traffic problems in the county, we run smack into the issue of money," Bovo said. "And the second issue is, we run into politics."

Disagreements arise over which corridor should receive services first, or which areas should benefit first, he noted.

"We haven't done anything massive in mass transit – only piecemeal projects," Bovo said.

He also warned that new ideas need to be discussed for moving truck cargo around the county – such as moving more freight at night – to avoid further congestion.

Bovo, who also pointed to Denver's

## Battling traffic

Studies indicate that commuting woes can significantly impact productivity at work. Here are some suggestions for companies to consider to help alleviate workers' traffic challenges:

- ▶ Encourage car pooling.
- ▶ Provide information on public transit alternatives.
- ▶ Shift work schedules away from the traditional 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.
- ▶ Offer flex hours or work-from-home options.
- ▶ Create traffic listservs or instant messaging options where employees can share updates on traffic conditions.
- ▶ Open smaller satellite offices.
- ▶ Implement no-car days, where employees are rewarded for not driving to work at least one day a week.
- ▶ Offer free parking only to those who carpool.

Source: Business Journal research

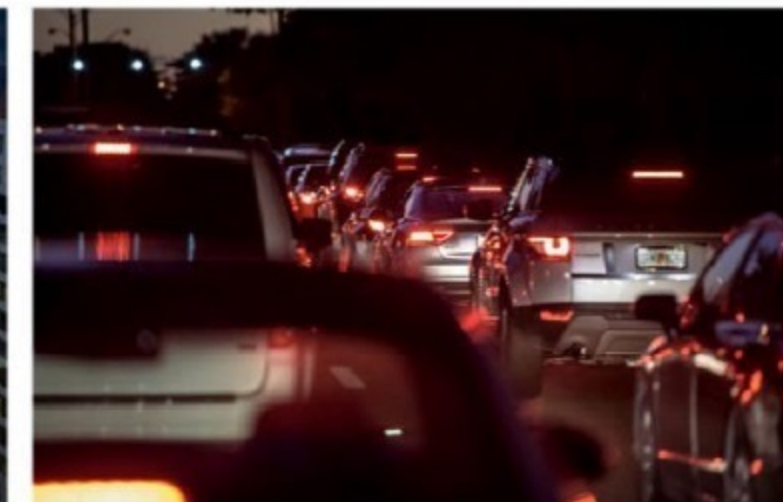
successful transit projects, suggested that the county look at the possibility of building a light rail line along the Dolphin Expressway, turnpike, or unused rail lines, perhaps with a public-private concession. He also suggested creating new transit corridors, improving the busway routes ("Buses are stuck in the same traffic.") and thinking of ways to use public-private partnerships via concessions.

"There's too much emphasis on wanting to develop a project in one city or another," Bovo said. "We have to work together, be creative with the money we have and look at what we can achieve."



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Traffic on Brickell Avenue, in Miami's business district.



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Southbound I-95 traffic exits onto U.S. 1 in Miami.