

Transportation Solutions

BY MAYOR CINDY LERNER



A transit solution for south Miami-Dade County is bringing light rail along the corridor on S. Dixie Hwy. Rapid transit connecting south Miami-Dade County to Downtown Miami and beyond has been a pipe dream for more

than two decades. The transit planning over that period of time has largely ignored the part of the county south of downtown, excusing their oversight by claiming there simply is not, nor will there be, sufficient population density to justify the investment.

Sadly, our elected leaders instead sought cheaper transit alternatives, settling for a rapid bus transit system. And sadder still, they never funded or made the full improvements we were promised and we paid for with our half penny sales tax to bring full bus rapid transit to the busway. Some history is in order.

Once funding and construction began back in 1997, with Phase 1 of three phases required to connect the Dadeland South Metro-rail station to the southern part of the county at Florida City, it was touted as a "state of the art S. Dixie Hwy. federal transit demonstration project." This project, when complete, would have provided a federally funded bus rapid transit system.

Phase 2 came in 2002 and upon completion of Phase 3 in 2006, and finding that the rapid was lacking in the bus transit, studies were commissioned by the MPO to identify additional ways to enhance and to subsidize additional costs. The problem was the 20-mile ride for south Miami-Dade residents, who started in Florida City or Homestead, wasn't rapid at all. Rather, if it stopped at every one of the more than two dozen stops, and the lights at every intersection, the commute took up to 70 minutes.

Later in 2006, the county's Southlink Citizens Committee recommended either light rail

or full bus rapid transit and the county determined the preferred alternative was full bus rapid transit. That was 10 years ago. The technology to synchronize the lights along the busway has been available for years, but was never instituted. The additional park and rides were identified, and some property purchased, but were never built. The additional infrastructure and technology notwithstanding, ridership has increased as a result of population, traffic and desperation to get to jobs in the northern parts of the county. The need has been so great that until recently, buses filled up and left passengers standing at the stops unable to board.

Finally, with a new commissioner in south Miami-Dade, additional buses have been added. While a light rail system, as many other U.S. cities have developed over the past two decades, had been suggested as an alternate in the Southlink study of 2006, leadership and vision was missing to make it a reality. And to make matters worse, our county MPO then began a study to divert the transit function completely and instead study the feasibility of creating another expressway out of the busway. The MPO lost its way completely, funding a several million dollar study (the MDX Study in 2011) which wasted precious time and money for three years, to determine whether it would be feasible to make the busway into an expressway with an express lane, and charge tolls to pay for the infrastructure, all of which was an absurd idea.

Many of us, including the Village of Pinecrest, were opposed to the study and the idea of removing a federally funded transit route, which also would have required the county to repay the federal government the \$18 million that was spent on building the busway, if they diverted the function away from transit. Pinecrest registered its concerns with a resolution that I sponsored which recommended stopping the 30-month study more than halfway through.

Thankfully, the Miami-Dade Legislative Delegation took on MDX during the legisla-

tive session of 2015 for raising tolls and for failing to invest in anything more than more expressways, and as a result, they froze the study and thankfully ended it before it was ever completed. It lasted three years and wasted untold millions of tax dollars. Three years and millions of dollars wasted on ridiculous plans imposed on us by the MPO.

So is there any wonder we are fed up, have lost trust and are now taking the matter into our own hands as a coalition of mayors, commissioners and legislators representing south Miami-Dade? South Miami-Dade mayors have a shared vision for light rail for the south Miami-Dade corridor. Finally the gridlock countywide has become so unbearable, the demand for transit solutions is being heard in every corner of the county. We in south Miami-Dade have been discussing our crisis and our options for several years, and finally the five mayors along with our county commissioners and state legislators have all joined in a unified vision for light rail to be brought to the south Miami-Dade corridor.

Mayors from Homestead, Florida City, Cutler Bay, Palmetto Bay and I along with County Commissioners Daniella Levine Cava and Xavier Suarez, and State Representative Kionne McGhee have held several workshops with the new MPO Executive Director, Maileen Boucle, and Miami-Dade Transit Director, Alice Bravo, and are in the process of finalizing a memorandum of understanding. The goal is light rail along the entire south Miami-Dade corridor from Dadeland to Florida City.

The MPO will immediately begin a NEPA study, required to apply for federal funding, and we fully expect to have our proposal approved by the full MPO next month. The proposal that will go before the MPO for our and other parts of the county's transit plans must get our combined support in order to assure the gridlock we all currently experience everywhere in the county will find real transit solutions in the next few years.