

OP-ED

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FDOT funding crucial to bringing Tri-Rail downtown

HIGHLIGHTS

Most government entities has put funding behind effort

State's FDOT contribution needed

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Almost hitting the target doesn't count, except maybe in a game of horseshoes. Finding solutions to South Florida's traffic problems is certainly not easy, but we're getting closer to some real game changers. It's time to push hard to go from "almost" to "done."

One initiative in the "almost" category is extending Tri-Rail service into downtown Miami. The Tri-Rail commuter service that connects West Palm Beach to Miami currently ends at Miami International Airport. Offering a direct option to Miami's downtown with easy transfers to Metrorail, Metromover and buses will significantly increase the likelihood of commuters using the train and leaving their cars at home.

Not only does it make sense to bring Tri-Rail into downtown, it makes sense to do it now. We can take advantage of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to leverage All Aboard Florida's private rail and station investment to do it affordably. In an incredible show of collaboration, all the funds have been promised from involved parties with one exception: The Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) has yet to confirm its contribution.

The Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce has made transportation and mobility its No. 1 focus and recently sent a delegation to Tallahassee to meet with legislators and policy makers, including FDOT, to ensure the voice of business and civic leaders is heard on this critical topic.

While there was unanimous agreement that something must be done, there needs to be a greater sense of urgency in moving forward with what can be done now as well as clear planning for the long-term.

The chamber recently passed a resolution urging Miami-Dade County to work with local stakeholders to expedite and bring an achievable plan to fruition. The chamber, in concert with The Beacon Council, Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau, Latin Builders Association and Miami-Dade Chamber of Commerce, has formed a coalition and is aggressively convening the relevant parties to push the process of prioritizing actions — and then determining funding for the many projects that have been identified as real solutions to our mobility woes.

But the fact that this long-term planning is still in progress shouldn't stop us from taking certain critical actions now. To leverage All Aboard Florida's private investment in a downtown Miami station, partner agencies were asked to participate in the incremental construction costs for the new rail infrastructure that would support the Tri-Rail Downtown Miami Link.

The city of Miami, Miami-Dade County, South Florida Regional Transportation Authority, Miami Downtown Development Authority, the OMNI CRA and the Southeast Overtown/Park West CRA all have committed significant funds to make this project a reality. FDOT is the remaining funding agency to finalize its contribution toward the project, which is approximately \$20 million of the \$70 million total.

Unfortunately, this project has an expiration date. A short window of opportunity exists to advance the Tri-Rail extension project to meet All Aboard Florida's Miami station construction timeline. Failure to incorporate Tri-Rail at this time likely would extinguish any chance of connecting downtown Miami to commuter rail, as it would substantially increase the costs and logistical challenges with retrofitting an existing station.

In the past, FDOT was on the leading edge of partnerships. Significant projects such as the PortMiami Tunnel, 25th Street Viaduct and state road 826/836 interchange all were accomplished through a collaborative funding program with FDOT's leadership.

As it prepares its work plan for the year ahead, we urge FDOT to go the last mile and quickly commit the necessary funds to complete the Tri-Rail extension to downtown Miami. Adding this connection will represent a positive impact at the regional level from both economic and mobility perspectives. With FDOT's support, this project will bring us closer to delivering solutions to efficiently and safely move people throughout South Florida.

CHRISTINE BARNEY IS CHAIR OF THE GREATER MIAMI CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND CEO OF RBB COMMUNICATIONS.



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