

Partnership with private developers could pave way for Metrorail's growth
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By Paola Iuspa

Hoping to avoid time-consuming and costly land-condemnation procedures, Miami-Dade County wants to partner with private property owners to develop future Metrorail and light rail lines.

While the county would build the rail infrastructure, property owners would retain rights to develop commercial or residential projects adjacent to the stations, said Alberto Parjus, chief of management services with the county's Office of Public Transportation Management. The projects would need to be transit friendly, he said.

County consultants and staff are now planning future routes and stations and expect to need at least two years to complete engineering and get government approvals for new stations, said Mario Garcia, transportation office chief of system planning. When that's finished, the county will be looking to form partnerships with landowners before taking land through eminent domain procedures.

But some Metrorail sites are already known.

"For example, in the North Corridor extension, which goes along 27th Avenue, the stations will be at the major intersections," Mr. Garcia said.

Plans for the county's recently approved transit tax call for adding about 89 miles of rail line. If the new stations are built one mile apart, as existing stations are, Mr. Garcia said, the county would need to acquire in the next 30 years land to build about 89 stations with space for parking garages.

"With this approach, we want to avoid the lengthy and expensive condemnation process," said Frank Talleda, manager of joint development leasing with the Office of Public Transportation Management. "We would allow property owners to keep development rights over their land."

Meanwhile, the county's public transportation management office rolls ahead to build mixed-use projects near existing Metrorail stations. Following the path of the Washington, DC, Metro system, the county is developing land adjacent to commuter rail stations and is beginning to apply the same concept to bus terminals and park & ride sites.

Currently, of Metrorail's 21 stations from Kendall to Hialeah, 16 are in the process of being developed or are already home to office buildings, rental apartments and mixed-use projects resulting from joint-development agreements between the county and developers, said Alberto Parjus, chief of management services with the county's Office of Public Transportation Management.

The remaining stations, including Hialeah, Civic Center and Tri-Rail, won't be developed because space is lacking.

As Mr. Parjus' office is working to lease some of the undeveloped Metrorail stations to developers, Miami-Dade commissioners on April 8 are to discuss a lease with Miami Metro Action Plan Trust, a not-for-profit community development agency with ties to the county. The group, hand-picked by the county commission, is proposing to build a 220-unit affordable rental building at the Northside Metrorail station, said Bill Simmons, a contract officer with the trust.

The county staff is currently negotiating a lease with Jubilee, a faith-based community development corporation proposing to build affordable housing at the Okeechobee Metrorail

station. That group was also chosen without competitive bidding when commissioners a year ago directed the county manager to negotiate development terms with Jubilee.

Plans to develop Brownsville Metrorail station were put on hold for at least two years after a possible deal with the American Red Cross crumbled a few weeks ago, said Frank Talleda, manager of joint development leasing with the Office of Public Transportation Management.

For seven months the Red Cross showed interest in building a headquarters by that station and relocating its Miami operations there. But after months of negotiations, Mr. Parjus said, the Red Cross decided the site was too small.

"Our hands are full right now," he said.

Development under way near other Metrorail stations includes:

- An affordable rental-housing complex with 128 two- and three-bedroom units is under construction at the Allapattah Metrorail station.
- Land adjoining Santa Clara Metrorail station will become home to a 208-unit affordable rental building now under construction and a planned 200-unit building with five levels of parking.
- A proposal to develop the Coconut Grove Metrorail station calls for 407-units of market-rate apartments, a 150-room hotel, 41,300 square feet of retail and a 367-space parking garage.
- The South Miami Metrorail Station, in the planning stages, would consist of a 98,000-square-foot office building, retail space and 150,000 square feet of market rate rental apartments above a parking garage, according to a county document.
- Dadeland North Metrorail Station already has about 320,000 square feet of big box retail built together with 9,600 square feet of ground floor transit-oriented retail. The developer plans to begin construction soon of a 4-story, 48-unit market rate rental apartment.
- Dadeland South Station is home to three Class A office buildings and the Dadeland Marriott Hotel, one of the busiest hotels in the state, Mr. Parjus said. That station still has one small parcel available for development.

Mr. Talleda said projects near other Metrorail stations are in the planning stages. He said developers often have six years to build.

When the county built the Metrorail system in the 1980s, it had to go through costly legal procedures to condemn the land, Mr. Parjus said. County officials often had to use the eminent domain process to acquire whole parcels when it only needed a strip, he said.

After building the rail stations, surplus land sometimes sat idle until the county awarded rights to developers proposing projects from affordable housing and hotels to office buildings and retail. In exchange, developers paid the county an annual fee until their lease expired and was committed to maintaining the property and providing security for commuters' cars, Mr. Parjus said.

Mr. Parjus said his department plans to use a different land acquisition procedure when building about 90 miles of extension to the rapid transit system. He said the county will offer landowners to partner with the county on property needed for the rail. While the county would build the Metrorail infrastructure, property owners could develop land adjacent to the stations.

The advantage of the county's plan to create partnerships with property is that the county could save money and create a new source of revenues.

"The county [will] no longer need to pay for the maintenance of the site and hire a security guard to be there for at least 17 hours," he said.

Plans for the county's recently approved transit tax call for adding about 89 miles of rapid transit. If the new stations were built one mile apart, as existing stations are, the county would

need to acquire in the next 30 years land to build about 89 stations with space for parking garages, said Mario Garcia, chief of system planning with the Office of Public Transportation Management.

Land acquisition is expected to cost 10% to 15% of the \$7 billion budgeted for the extension program, scheduled to be completed by 2031, he said.

Mr. Talleda said sites for new stations won't be determined for a couple of years. Establishing the new rapid transit alignment will require many hearings.

To maximize the use of land in the buses' park & ride areas, Mr. Parjus' office is proposing to build affordable housing for seniors together with a parking garage for bus riders.

Two sites being considered for housing are Bird Road and Southwest 89th Avenue and Tamiami Trail and Southwest 127th Avenue. Both projects would be done in partnership with the Housing Finance Authority of Miami-Dade, which reports to the county commission.