

Group opposing xway tolls backed by Zapata

BY RICHARD YAGER

The first citizens meeting on Sept. 27 to “Roll Back Tolls” on five Miami-Dade expressways got an unexpected boost from a state legislator who represents Kendall.

Before an audience of about 50 residents, a letter from District 119 Rep. Juan C. Zapata not only thanked the group’s action but pledged assistance to restructure the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority (MDX) and transfer its responsibilities to the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT).

“I, along with members of the Miami Dade delegation,...have been working on this issue for many years and were frustrated by the lack of support from our other colleagues,” Zapata said in the letter read by Thais A. Asper, aide to the Kendall area legislator now serving his last year in office due to term limits.

Naming Anitere Flores, Marcelo Llorente, JC Planas and Julio Robaina as co-supporters in the Florida Legislature, the letter listed two major changes sought by the delegation:

1. Creating an elective governing board with majority of five elected officials and two governor-appointed members, and,
2. Transferring MDX duties back to FDOT (Florida Department of Transportation).

The current MDX board is made up of 12 members plus a single FDOT representative appointed by the governor and Miami-Dade Commissioners.

In addition, Zapata said the delegation has sought advance advertising of MDX toll increases, rolling back toll rates, prohibiting contract lobbyists and disclosing finances of existing board members.

Zapata’s statement concluded: “Unfortunately, we faced many obstacles state law poses to making any changes once toll revenues have been committed to payment on an outstanding bond,” a subject that led to extensive discussion about the agency during the “Roll Back” meeting.

The recognition by state legislators “left us more than pleasantly surprised by this stand,” said Carlos Garcia, co-organizer of the current “Roll Back” move with Miller Myers. Both are Kendall area advertising professionals.

“Things came out of Monday night’s discussions and those held previously with MDX that have changed the basic mission of our effort,” Garcia stated, noting a revised mission statement was posted on the group’s website on Sept. 28, stressing accountability

and improved communications about MDX.

The statement reads: “The mission of Roll-BackTolls.com is to re-establish ownership, authority and accountability of roads currently owned by MDX, back to the citizens of Miami-Dade County. RollBackTolls.com seeks to become a point of communication, education and watchdog in this process.”

Due to the need to provide some acceptable method of financing expressway development, we need to embark on a communication program with the public,” Garcia explained. “That will be emphasized in our future discussions and meetings.”

The group next will seek attention of the Miami-Dade County Commission about its concerns, including time on a meeting agenda within the next 30 to 60 days, he added.

Miles Moss, president of Kendall Federation of Homeowner Associations (KFHA), host for the special meeting, noted MDX had made several presentations of future plans at association town meetings, openly describing the agency’s status and objectives.

Both Moss and others often defended MDX’s position to correct misconceptions of the agency’s legal status and authority.

Lawrence Percival, KFHA executive vice president, said his experience as a 10-year observer at MDX meetings “has been that they work with the public and strive to be responsive. MDX officials have been holding meetings in our community since 2000 and their presence, whether at organization or community council meetings, has been constant,” he said.

In a website blog, Percival added that MDX works diligently to invest all the tolls that it collects in improvements to the system, and they make sure that the revenue does not go to other parts of the state.”

Whether tolls or a return to gasoline tax should maintain and expand Miami expressways occupied much of the Roll Back meeting with several residents defending MDX toll collections, rather than risk lower funding in proportion to the county’s gas tax collections when disproportionately redistributed by FDOT throughout the state for road maintenance and improvements.

“It is this kind of thing that we want the public to become aware of,” Garcia stated. “What we’re really after comes down to accountability and the need for a watchdog over how the agency operates.”