One of Miami's Community Newspapers

Connecting Communities.

Cutler Bay NEWS

DEC. 24, 2013 - JAN. 6, 2014 — communitynewspapers.com — 305-669-7355

Two mayors oppose widening turnpike in South Miami-Dade

ABY RICHARD YAGER

Mayors of the two cities most concerned with expansion of Florida's Turnpike over an 11-mile stretch in South Miami-Dade County jointly turned thumbs down on widening planned during a public hearing in Homestead on Dec. 11. Cutler Bay Mayor Edward MacDougall and Homestead Mayor Jeff Porter both expressed opposition to expanding portions of the highway to six or eight lanes.

The proposal essentially adds north and southbound express lanes that would extend from SW 312th Street (Campbell Drive) north to SW 137th Avenue, over an 11-mile stretch at a cost of $284 million, replacing current four- and six-lane segments.

An initial $78 million project slated to start in 2014, north from SW 288th Street (Biscayne Drive) to SW 216th Street (Hainline Mill Road). An additional $206 million would replace six lanes with eight, north to SW 137th Avenue, a project scheduled to start by 2015.

Incensed over "poor communications" with town officials in weeks preceding the hearing, Mayor MacDougall termed the plan "nothing more than a move to boost toll revenues." In November, MacDougall had asked for a postponement of a Nov. 21 expansion hearing in Cutler Bay.

"I never even had the courtesy of a reply until learning the hearing had been reset in Homestead," he told a small audience at Hampton Inn.

Mayor Porter echoed the criticism, emphasizing failure by turnpike officials "to present such an important issue before our city government and our citizens for adequate review of its consequences."

Porter vowed that the Homestead City Council would vote a resolution against the project before turnpike officials closed acceptance of public commentary on Dec. 23.

Cutler Bay Vice Mayor Ernie Sochin, the only other city official speaking in favor of the projects, favored six- to eight-lane expansions if only to relieve the inevitable traffic congestion already in progress, adding, "And I wish they would stop calling them 'Lexus Lanes.'

"Plenty of guys drive panel trucks on I-95 express lanes, getting them to jobs on time that might otherwise be lost to support their families," he said.

Asked if such commentary might affect the turnpike's decision, Florida's Turnpike spokesperson Sonyha Rodriguez-Miller said, "We will be reviewing all comments received" after the Dec. 23 date, adding that a "go or no go" decision was anticipated by the end of January 2014.

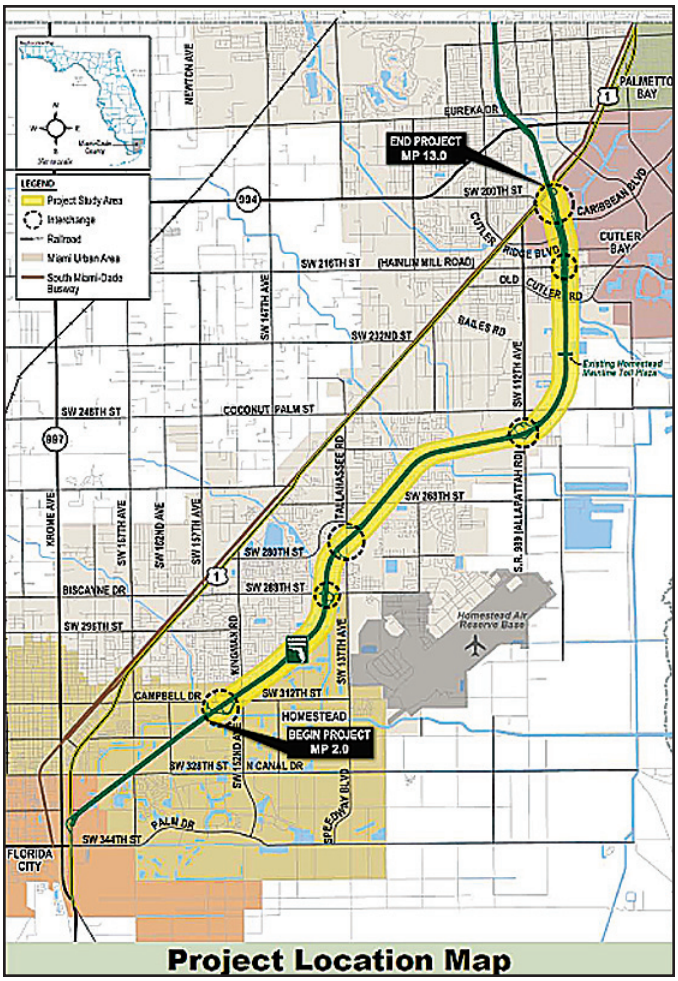
Among less than 16 residents attending the hearing, none spoke to support expansion after viewing panels and documents arrayed to describe the southernmost turnpike section to undergo expansion, largely an effort to build express lanes from Homestead through Kendall to the Dolphin Expressway (SR 836) as a way of relieving commuter traffic tie-ups.

Objections also were voiced by RollBackTolls chair Carlos Garcia who said the turnpike totally failed to prepare Miami-Dade officials and citizens adequately for expansion plans through advertised public notices and meetings, "especially this one, called just two weeks before the Christmas holidays."

West Kendall's Jane Walker, who co-led a protest resulting in withdrawal of turnpike planning to build expressway lane access at SW 104th Street (Killian Parkway), challenged executive director Diane Gutierrez-Scaccetti, present for the session, to produce "any demographic evidence supporting economics that would prove the necessity of expanding the turnpike in this area."

Walker said on-line contact to 60,000 Sunpass holders to receive comment "was a phony play because it required citizens to 'opt on' to answer turnpike queries, a reverse of normal Internet querying techniques."

In a letter to Garcia, Gutierrez-Scaccetti indicated the turnpike would change its procedure in the future with an "opt-in" question allowing customers to state their preference for receiving information.



The planned 11-mile turnpike expansion cuts across southwest corner of Cutler Bay.

Turnpike engineer Tom Percival along with Carol Baker, turnpike consultant, led the hour-long presentation with a detailed description of new lanes that they said were planned primarily to relieve future area growth by adding express lanes in southwest Miami-Dade to diminish traffic congestion.

Expansion south of SR 836 also is considered essential to Monroe and South Miami-Dade County as the area's only route for emergency evacuation during an impending hurricane, they stated.

For more information, visit the Florida Department of Transportation website at <www.dot.state.fl> or <www.floridasturnpike.com> with links to current projects.