

Miami-Dade approves \$76 million to bring Brightline trains to Aventura Mall

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Brightline trains could be running from downtown Miami to Aventura within a year after Miami-Dade commissioners approved paying \$76 million to build the for-profit rail company a station connecting to the Aventura Mall.

Friday's lopsided vote came despite concerns about fares being too pricey for everyday commuters and what the deal with the company behind Virgin trains would mean for the prospects of the Tri-Rail commuter line ever starting service along the same corridor.

But with transit ambitions stalled or subdued across Miami-Dade, commissioners seized on a rail option that brought no yearly operating costs or need to build new tracks.

Neisen Kasdin, a former Miami Beach mayor and a lawyer representing the Aventura Mall, speaks with Aventura Mayor Enid Weisman Friday at a county commission meeting on a \$76 million proposal to build a new train station for Brightline by the retail destination. Both spoke in favor of the proposal, which passed.

"We have been talking for years," said Commissioner Rebeca Sosa, on the board since 2001. "If we sit down and do nothing, nothing will ever happen in this county. ... So it's time for us to step up and start."

Brightline may only charge passengers between Aventura and Miami 65 percent of what it would cost to ride one of the company's trains from Miami to Fort Lauderdale, currently the next stop after downtown Miami. Using today's fares, that would make a one-way ride to Aventura about \$9.75, more than four times the \$2.25 Metrorail charges.

"How many people are we actually going to serve here? Because it's not a commuter rail," said Commissioner Joe Martinez, who represents a suburban district miles away from the county's Metrorail system. "The fares, I think, will be out of the reach of a lot of people."

Miami-Dade Commissioner Jose "Pepe" Diaz, left, Jose Gonzalez, executive vice president of Florida East Coast Industries and Commissioner Joe A. Martinez, right, talk before the commission approved \$76 million to build Brightline a new station at the Aventura Mall.

The Brightline proposal briefly died at the emergency commission meeting arranged by Mayor Carlos Gimenez to consider the deal for a county-funded station. Martinez, Daniella Levine Cava, Jean Monestime and Xavier Suarez initially voted against it, denying Gimenez the two-thirds vote required under county rules governing a no-bid development contract.

Monestime switched to a Yes after negotiating a concession on the spot, with both Gimenez and Brightline's Jose Gonzalez agreeing to make any residential development on the property dedicated to workforce-housing units, which typically charge below-market rents.

"We have a crisis when it comes to mass transit," Monestime said. "We have a crisis when it comes to housing. I think if we're going to contribute such a large amount of money to developing the site, I'd like them to take that into consideration."

The Brightline proposal, made public 11 days ago, was the first significant commission debate since multiple term-limited commissioners filed to run for mayor in 2020. Levine Cava, Monestime and Suarez are all running to succeed a term-limited Gimenez, as is Commissioner Esteban “Steve” Bovo, who endorsed the Brightline plan. “I think it’s important that we leave a footprint, to say, ‘Look we got something done,’ ” he said.

Martinez left before the final vote on the proposal, leaving Levine Cava and Suarez the only two on the No side.

Brightline’s tracks run on private land that was once part of the old Henry Flagler railroad system, and running commuter trains on that land has been a transit goal in Miami-Dade for decades. That stretch was dubbed the “Northeast Corridor” in Miami-Dade’s 2016 reset of transit studies known as the SMART Plan, which is developing new transportation plans for six of the county’s busiest commuting routes.

With Friday’s deal, the Northeast would have a new rail stop well before any of the other corridors could.

Miami-Dade already approved a rapid-transit bus route for the South corridor, where Metrorail had once been slated for expansion, and the commission isn’t scheduled to consider proposals for the SMART route to Miami Beach until the spring. The other corridors are awaiting action by the commission or other county boards.

“It means that’s there an expansion of rail service for commuters here in Miami-Dade,” said Gimenez, who in 2016 aired a reelection ad on a Metrorail car with the headline More Rail Lines. “I kept my promise.”

Miami-Dade plans to spend up to \$76 million on the new station at the 19700 block of West Dixie Highway, which would include a pedestrian bridge over the highway and Biscayne Boulevard connecting to the Aventura Mall. The county would use reserves from its half-percent sales tax, the main source of money for transit expansion, to fund the agreement. Brightline would serve as developer of the station, but Miami-Dade would continue to own the real estate once purchased.

While Brightline would pay to operate the new train service, Miami-Dade may end up contributing significant dollars to the rail line's operations in the future.

Gimenez said the county planned to negotiate a potential subsidy to lower Brightline fares closer to what transit users pay on Metrorail. Gimenez stopped short of endorsing that kind of deal, which several commissioners said they wanted.

"If we want to reduce fares further, there is a subsidy we probably need to negotiate with them," Gimenez said, noting the county's bus and rail networks generate a fraction of their operating costs through fare revenue. "Anybody who steps into any of our systems are being subsidized right now."

The deal projects an opening date for the three-acre Aventura station and park-and-ride commuter lot in October 2020, but Brightline has until late 2022 to launch service or risk losing the agreement. The company agreed to run trains every 30 minutes during what it defines as rush hour — 6 a.m. to 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. — and reserve 20 percent of a train's seats for the discounted Aventura rates until 48 hours before departure time.

After that, the seats would be available to any passenger, including those paying the discounted rate to Aventura and those paying the highest rate for the full Brightline route to West Palm Beach.

The trip is expected to take about 15 minutes from Miami, with trains pausing for less than two minutes in Aventura before rolling on to the next stop.

Brightline also agreed to design the station so that a Tri-Rail platform could be added at a later date. The fate of Tri-Rail's expansion plans loomed over the Aventura proposal, since Brightline is a key player in the tax-funded commuter rail's future.

Tri-Rail was supposed to start service in 2017 to a platform in Brightline's downtown Miami station, a depot Tri-Rail and local governments spent about \$70 million to build. Brightline said delays in

implementing and winning regulatory approval for safety upgrades mandated by new federal railroad laws may delay the start until well into 2020.

Brightline's rail corridor also is the potential future "Coastal Link" for Tri-Rail, which would run commuter trains making multiple stops on tracks running alongside the for-profit trains. That idea of parallel tracks, one for the express Brightline service and one for local stops from Tri-Rail, requires Brightline to sign the kind of access agreement with Tri-Rail that has yet to materialize.

The agreement approved Friday states talks will continue with Tri-Rail, which endorsed the Aventura station plan. With Brightline not yet striking a deal with Tri-Rail and now expanding into at least one shorter stop, the Aventura station has raised the possibility of the for-profit company opting to provide commuter service on the corridor instead of Tri-Rail.

Jose Gonzalez, a top executive at Florida East Coast Industries, which owns Brightline, said he still expected Tri-Rail to pursue stations between Miami and Aventura.

"That's not our business model," he said of the local stations requiring frequent stops by commuter trains. Aventura was uniquely attractive, Gonzalez said, because it offers Florida's largest mall in the midst of a built-out area between two existing Brightline stops.

"It's a halfway point," he said, "and it's a more dense area that has a lot more opportunities for ridership."