

VALLIANT NEWS

Broward's runaway rail dreams

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The timing couldn't be worse for Broward County commissioners to propose a penny increase in the county's six-cent sales tax — to fund a transportation initiative that includes light rail.

It's not just that commissioners also plan to pass a penny increase in the county's five-cent hotel bed tax — to fund a proposed expansion of the Broward County Convention Center.

Or that with property values up 9.3 percent this year, they're also letting property taxes rise — to fund sizable budget increases in county government.

No, the timing is terrible because to construct The Wave streetcar in downtown just came in way over budget — to the tune of \$75 million. On a per-mile basis, this controversial project is now on track to becoming the nation's most expensive.

Let's remember that when downtown developers first proposed this 2.8-mile downtown circulator more than 14 years ago, they said it would cost \$142 million, plus \$6 million per year to run it. About two years ago, the project's cost jumped to \$195 million.

Even still, government budget writers got it all wrong. The bids to build the streetcar now put the cost over \$270 million.

For construction alone, the (FDOT) expected to pay \$114 million. But the bids recently came in between \$189 million and \$218 million, putting the per-mile rate as high as \$77 million. Now consider the per-mile cost in : Cincinnati, \$37 million; Kansas City, \$25 million; Tucson, \$22 million; and Portland, Ore., \$28 million.

While the FDOT selection team is under a “cone of silence” and can't discuss the bids, it's said the bidders consider Fort Lauderdale an with aging underground pipes, though we're hardly as old as Kansas City or Cincinnati. The cost of redoing the gears and mechanisms on the S.E. 3rd Avenue Bridge is also said to have bumped up the price. Plus we hear questions about whether FDOT got something wrong in the bid package and whether bidders followed the rules.

But with costs having nearly doubled for this light-rail starter line, why should voters have any confidence in the county's to raise the sales tax for a 30-mile streetcar system, plus road and bus improvements?

On Monday, the FDOT selection committee will meet to decide next steps for The Wave. It's expected the project will be put back out to bid.

“What I guess they will do is go through and scour the bid to see if there's a deficiency in there that caused confusion,” said Greg Stuart, executive director of the Metropolitan Planning Organization, which is a partner on the project.

“I would anticipate they’ll ask, ‘Is this necessary as part of this project?’ and do some value engineering to bring the cost in line with the estimate,” he said.

“Value engineering” sounds like code for cutting amenities or essential elements.

For context, the group of developers long pushing this project want you know that The Wave has evolved from being a stand-alone downtown circulator to being the start of the county’s light-rail system.

The original “vehicle maintenance facility” was designed for five streetcars, but later designed for 15, says Jenni Morejon, executive director of the Downtown Development Authority (DDA). Plus, the size of the cars grew to hybrid light-rail vehicles. And the communication and signalization system was amped up in anticipation of a future light-rail system.

“These are all enhancements to make the Wave and the full rail system better, but might not be needed in this first phase,” Morejon said in an email. “From DDA’s perspective, bid modifications that won’t impact the reliability or safety of the project could be considered to reduce the cost.”

Whew, boy. The cuts will have to be big to save \$74 million. And the cars themselves aren’t part of the bid.

Remember, too, that The Wave has drawn from neighborhood civic associations along the line. Critics call it the Train to Nowhere because of its route. They note its chief purpose is to foster growth and development, not to relieve congestion. In fact, powered by overhead wires, it is designed to run on rails laid in existing roadways. So upon its arrival at one of 13 proposed stops, motorists behind it would have to wait.

Plus, last month we learned the red-and-yellow Sun Trolley, which now circulates around downtown, is and facing a \$46 million budget gap over the next 10 years.

So yes, it was poor timing last week for Broward County commissioners to talk about raising the sales tax to fund a transportation initiative that promises hundreds of buses, wider roads and 30 miles of streetcar routes.

We’ll reserve judgment on the sales-tax plan until we’ve seen more details, but skepticism is warranted given the track record of over-budget rail projects, including The Wave.

Besides, has anyone noticed what’s happening in -Dade County? Mayor Carlos Gimenez has abandoned efforts to expand Metrorail. Instead, he’s proposing snazzy high-tech electric buses that run on dedicated highway lanes. He changed course, the , because of rail’s high costs and the decades these systems take to complete. Plus, he expects autonomous vehicles will make trains obsolete.

Look, too, at what’s happening in Jacksonville, which wants to replace the downtown Skyway rail system with that can go beyond downtown to more places people want to go.

And look at the new system in Orlando, which opened in 2014 and has yet to draw the riders promised by politicians. SunRail’s doesn’t even cover the cost of selling the tickets, the Orlando Sentinel reported earlier this year.

Nationwide, many transit systems are seeing “catastrophic declines” because of low energy prices, growing maintenance backlogs, unfunded employee benefits and ride-hailing services, the libertarian Cato Institute says in its new report, “The Coming .”

“Some predict that within five years, those ride-hailing services will begin using driverless cars, which will reduce their fares to rates competitive with transit, but with far more convenient service,” it notes.

Before rushing headlong into another tax push for a rail system, shouldn't Broward leaders consider the transformation underway in transportation? Without question, adding road lanes is enormously expensive, their common argument. But given that, why are they shrinking road lanes while approving ever more development?

Last year, more than a thousand Fort Lauderdale citizens petitioned the city commission for a one-year moratorium on new construction and a good hard look at traffic concerns. Their petition was swept aside on a , its sentiment ignored by a commission majority. Critics of The Wave have faced similar wave-offs.

Yes, there was public resistance to the Sawgrass Expressway and Miami's Metrorail back in the day. But a growing chorus of citizens feels unheard on the streetcar, shrinking roadways and skyscrapers built without concern for traffic consequences.

Last year, Anne Castro, who chairs the Broward County Planning Council, said planners have to make it painful before people will leave their cars. "We're going to first, and then we're going to figure out ways to move them after that because they're going to scream at us to help them move."

Taxpayers are not only feeling pain in their cars, they're feeling pain in their wallets from ever-rising taxes. And it's hard to see how they will support a tax increase if they don't feel heard.

On Friday, Stuart told us that while the MPO's executive committee supports The Wave, it has no appetite for moving forward at \$270 million because of the poor return on investment.

“We'd like to move forward, but the numbers are ridiculous,” he said. “The juice isn't worth the squeeze.”

It's good to hear the MPO's executive committee — comprised of representatives from county government and the cities of Fort Lauderdale, Lighthouse Point, Davie and Hollywood — will not move forward at any cost.

Because if The Wave goes down, there's a chance to start anew — not with throwback technology, but with transformative technology that will carry us into the future.