



**Florida Department of Transportation-D-6      News Clip**  
**Port of Miami Tunnel Project**

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Subject:        **Dade takes the plunge on port tunnel**

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*BY LARRY LEBOWITZ*

## **Dade takes the plunge on port tunnel**

A plan to build a tunnel under Biscayne Bay to the Port of Miami took a big step forward, as the Miami-Dade Commission approved spending hundreds of millions to pay for it.

Miami-Dade commissioners took a leap of faith into Biscayne Bay on Tuesday, ratifying the county's \$402.5 million share of a historic public-private partnership to build a \$1 billion tunnel to the Port of Miami.

"Look, we've been talking about this for more than 20 years. It's time to fish or cut bait," Commissioner Carlos Gimenez said.

With the 9-3 vote, the county and state have now committed more than 95 percent of the money needed to repay a team of international firms that want to finance, design, build and operate the tunnel over a 35-year period.

Several commissioners fretted about paying for a portion of the county's share by tolling the tunnel and the Port Boulevard bridge.

An outbound-only toll -- perhaps as high as \$2 to \$3 per car and \$5 to \$7 for trucks and buses -- is a strong possibility but not a certainty, County Manager George Burgess said.

The possibility will grow if the county is forced to chip in a large portion of the \$100 million it is setting aside toward its share of several large construction contingency funds.

Commissioner Dennis Moss suggested that his colleagues ought to explore reenacting a local option gas tax of two cents a gallon to blunt the potential for a future toll. Each penny of the tax generates \$7.5 million today.

Cruise industry representatives said they do not back a toll that would affect their employees or an increase in the per-ticket surcharges that their customers already pay to support port operations.

Under the plan ratified Tuesday, commissioners would contribute up to \$402.5 million toward the tunnel construction through a variety of transportation taxes, bonds and fees generated at the port.

The state will be putting up \$457 million for its portion of the construction, plus another \$8 million to \$9 million a year toward the tunnel's operation and maintenance costs over a 35-year agreement with a team of international vendors.

The tunnel team, headed by French construction giant Bouygues Travaux Publics, attracted some controversy from Miami's influential Cuban exiles.

A Bouygues affiliate has built 11 resort hotels on the communist island in joint ventures with a branch of the Cuban military.

"This project is morally wrong," said Miami attorney Nicolas Gutierrez, who represents the descendants of a Cuban family whose property was expropriated by the Castro regime. One of the resorts that the Bouygues affiliate helped construct is on the family property in eastern Cuba.

But in the end, only Commissioner Javier Souto, a Bay of Pigs veteran, specifically mentioned the firm's ties to Cuba in casting his vote against the deal. Also voting against the deal were Commissioners Natacha Seijas and Rebeca Sosa.

Commissioners Gimenez, Moss, Bruno Barreiro, Jose "Pepe" Diaz, Audrey Edmonson, Sally Heyman, Barbara Jordan, Dorrin Rolle and Katy Sorensen voted for it. Commissioner Joe Martinez was absent.

The tunnel isn't a done deal yet.

Miami commissioners still need to ratify the city's contribution -- \$50 million cash, \$5 million in right-of-way on Watson Island -- to the complicated tunnel financing package. A vote won't occur before September.

If the contracts are signed by the end of the year, full-scale construction could start in September 2008.

Barring any major geological issues or schedule-swallowing catastrophes such as a hurricane, the consortium estimates the tunnel could be open for traffic in late 2012.