



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

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Miami Seaport tunnel could open by 2012

By Paul Scott Abbott, AJOT

A long-awaited tunnel linking Miami's island seaport to the mainland Interstate highway system could be in place as early as 2012, according to a Florida highway official.

"If everything fell into place, we could probably open in 2012," Nancy Clements, director of planning for Florida's Turnpike Enterprise, said Aug. 24 in an interview with the American Journal of Transportation following a presentation at a daylong Port of Miami Summit that included a series of events linking the port's 100-year history with plans for its future.

The idea of a tunnel, which would allow trucks carrying cargo containers to bypass clogged downtown Miami streets, has been talked of since the 1980s but has never come about because of a lack of funds.

Clements told AJOT that the cost for the mile-long underwater link will be "in excess of \$1 billion, but she said she is hopeful that it can be funded through a combination of means, which may include public- and private-sector partners and unconventional tolling mechanisms.

Charles A. Towsley, port director of the Dante B. Fascell Port of Miami-Dade, told a summit gathering of more than 200 local business and government leaders that a tunnel will be needed for the busy cargo and cruise port to keep pace with projected increases in activity.

"The tunnel is the future," Towsley said. "We need to get support."

According to John Vickerman, principal of the transportation-consulting firm of TranSystems Corp., container traffic at the Port of Miami is projected to double or even triple by 2025.

Currently, the port, on manmade island property in Biscayne Bay, is connected to the mainland solely by a six-lane, fixed-span bridge that opened in 1991, replacing a two-lane drawbridge.

Truck traffic associated with a current annual throughput of more than 1 million 20-foot-equivalent container units (teus) -- plus buses and cars handling cruise passenger counts approaching 4 million a year - must now inch through several blocks of downtown streets between the port bridge and I-395. Those streets are becoming increasingly crowded with residential and business redevelopment in addition to growing cargo and passenger volumes at the port.

Clements' turnpike agency, which operates under the umbrella of the Florida Department of Transportation, assumed direction of the proposed tunnel project in late 2002 - two years after an FDOT study, supported by the U.S. Department of Transportation, recommended that a tunnel be bored under the port's north channel.

To date, a pledge of \$100 million in bond funds has been the only money committed to the building of such a tunnel, according to Clements, who said she does not think any single source, including tolls, could sufficient cover the high-ticket cost of tunnel construction.

"We are looking for financial partners," Clements said. State officials are "leaning toward" what she termed "shadow tolls on different services at the port" as opposed to traditional tollbooth levies on vehicles transiting the tunnel.

Such nontraditional tolling mechanisms could include a fee charged for each cargo container moving through the Port of Miami and/or a fee assessed each cruise passenger, Clements said.

Clements conceded that an earlier plan had cited a possible traditional toll of \$8 per truck transiting the tunnel, but she said that notion, which has drawn ire from truckers, appears unlikely to proceed.

No matter how tolls are assessed, they are not likely to come close to footing the entire bill for construction, Clements said.

Meetings are planned this fall to include leaders from both public and private sectors in hopes of finding funding partners, she added.

Noting that the tunnel is a priority for FDOT and Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, she said she remains hopeful that the go-ahead to proceed with construction may finally be near.

"Optimistically, that 'go' could come as early as two years," Clements said, adding that construction would take five years from that time.

Under the favored plan, the existing port bridge would remain in place after the tunnel's completion. Trucks and buses would be required to use the tunnel, while cars would have the option of using either the tunnel or the bridge. The bridge likely would also have a toll directly or indirectly associated with it.

Port access was one of several issues discussed during the Port of Miami Summit, which culminated a series, over the past nine months, of seven roundtable discussions between port officials and stakeholders.

Also cited were competitive services and rates, updated infrastructure, customer satisfaction, environmental enhancement, dredging, security funding, community outreach, growth management, improved communications, better berthing, seamless gate systems, new parking and the port's image.

"The future is indeed bright," said Vickerman, whose firm was hired by the county-run port to, as he said, "assist the port in visioning the future." "Properly managing growth will be one of our biggest challenges."

Vickerman projected, using a "conservative" model, that container traffic through the Port of Miami will increase by 103 percent by 2025, to more than two million teus a year. An "aggressive" model puts that 20-year growth rate at 199 percent, to some three million teus a year by 2025.

The Port of Miami is in the midst of a \$350 million capital improvement plan, but that does not address the issue of access between the island port and the mainland. Elements of the plan include a new entry gate complex, new on-site roadways, furthering of the initiative to deepen channel and turning basin areas to 42 feet, electrification of gantry cranes, a new refrigerated container yard, wharf expansion, more parking garages and new cruise terminals.

The summit also included unveiling of an update to the port's Web site - still at www.miamidade.gov/port of miami -- a presentation on the port's history, a luncheon aboard Norwegian Cruise Line's Norwegian Dawn and breakout discussions focusing on cargo, cruise, security and environmental and community issues. The summit concluded with a reception commemorating the 100th anniversary of the opening of Government Cut, which cleared a waterway between the Atlantic Ocean and the area on which the Port of Miami would soon thrive.

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