



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

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TRANSPORTATION

FDOT reveals glimpse of tunnel plans linking port

The Florida Department of Transportation gave engineers and builders a brief overview of how it wants to build a tunnel linking the Port of Miami-Dade to the MacArthur Causeway.

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A proposal to build a tunnel for the Port of Miami-Dade took a small step toward reality Monday as the Florida Department of Transportation held an informational meeting for firms who would design, finance, build and operate the project.

If the tunnel is built, work could start in seven years. The next step: Firms must give the state information about their qualifications by March 17.

The Port of Miami Tunnel has been discussed for 25 years as a way to ease traffic congestion at the port, where long lines of trucks back up often, especially before and after weekends. Now there is a growing consensus that building the tunnel is feasible engineering-wise, and that the port desperately needs the tunnel to grow. The 24,000 estimated vehicles entering the port daily in 2003 is expected to rise to 70,000 daily by 2033, FDOT predicts.

The tunnel would dip under Biscayne Bay, linking the Port of Miami-Dade to the MacArthur Causeway at Watson Island. Traffic would then flow onto Interstate 395, allowing trucks to bypass downtown's increasingly busy streets.

Some parts of the plan -- including the cost -- are sketchy, but FDOT managers Monday did offer a few details about how it would be built.

- The 3,900-foot tunnel will have two lanes in each direction. It will be built by boring into the ground, like the train tunnel under the English Channel. An alternative -- cutting a trench in the floor of Biscayne Bay and inserting tubes of a pre-constructed tunnel in sections -- was scrapped because of potential environmental damage.

FDOT warned of numerous challenges: The tunnel will be wide, at 40 feet in diameter; it will have a steep grade of 5 percent; the builder must also dispose of the muck that will be excavated.

"Picture the existing bridge -- and invert it," said port Director Charles Towsley after the meeting.

- FDOT wants to take a back seat in the tunnel's construction, turning over the project to a private firm. The builder would get some county and state money up front but would be responsible for financing the rest. When completed, the builder would receive payments annually for operating and maintaining the tunnel.

FDOT said Monday it envisions a private firm managing the tunnel for between 35 and 50 years after it opens.

So far, Miami-Dade County has earmarked \$100 million and FDOT has \$175 million for the project. Local and state governments could set aside additional money before construction begins.

The tunnel is estimated to cost between \$1.3 billion and \$1.5 billion.

- There is little enthusiasm for a toll system, even one that operates electronically, said Jeffrey Parker, a financial consultant for FDOT. Trucking companies are complaining about that scenario, and any tunnel toll could divert trucks back to the existing bridge and through downtown. That bridge was built with federal money, making it difficult to levy tolls for its use, Parker said.

FDOT wants to have a list of firms with enough qualifications by April. The next step will be asking those firms to submit detailed proposals in the fall, and to award the job in December.