



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

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The \$1.2 billion plan to build a tunnel to the Port of Miami-Dade took a small step forward today when the Miami-Dade Commission signaled its approval. The Florida Department of Transportation will oversee the project and pay half, but the county's plan for paying its \$600 million share is still fuzzy.

A finalized financing plan must be completed by late February, when the transportation department awards the project to one of three bidders, said Assistant Secretary Lowell Clary. Without that, the deal would almost certainly collapse and the state would spend its \$600 million elsewhere.

"Not every T is crossed or I dotted," said County Manager George Burgess. "Some of our strategies will be gelling over the next couple of months, hopefully."

Burgess said about \$100 million will come from a general-obligation bond approved by voters in 2004, \$114 million from local transportation fees and \$47 million in the form of right of way donated by the port. The City of Miami is considering a contribution of \$50 million. Without that, county Commissioner Dennis Moss, said the deal could die.

That would still leave more than \$200 million, which Burgess hopes to generate by charging tolls to drive into the port or increasing user fees for cargo and cruise ships. Those industries said such fees could make the Miami port less economical than Port Everglades, its Broward County competitor.

"This is a big leap of faith we're taking without having all the pieces in place," said Commissioner Katy Sorenson. Burgess assured her the contract leaves the private builder -- not the state or county government -- responsible for cost overruns.

The tunnel would run from I-395 to the port, allowing trucks to bypass surface streets and easing traffic in the fast-developing neighborhood around Bayside Marketplace and the American Airlines Arena.

In approving the plan by a 9-0 vote, commissioners overwhelmingly said the tunnel -- which would open in 2013 -- is necessary for Miami's shipping industry to thrive.

"At the end of the day," said Commissioner José "Pepe" Diaz, "the money's going to come back triple in more business, more jobs."

Miami Herald staff writer Larry Lebowitz contributed to this report.

