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Beach's tunnel vision starting at seaport called 'deal breaker'

By RISA POLANSKY

Changing port tunnel construction plans to appease Miami Beach leaders would be a project "deal breaker," a high-ranking local Florida Department of Transportation official says.

Beach officials in recent weeks have begun protesting the longstanding plan to begin digging underwater tunnels to the seaport in the median of the MacArthur Causeway - the main artery onto the island, especially for tourists.

"We are not against the tunnel, but we are concerned of what the tunnel may disrupt in the City of Miami Beach," Mayor Matti Herrera Bower said at a Miami-Dade Metropolitan Planning Organization meeting.

"The tunnel is needed because 7,000 trucks go through the City of Miami every single day, and I just don't want to move the problem from one area to the other area," the mayor said, reminding other local leaders on the transportation planning board that Miami Beach is

"part of the economic engine of the whole Dade County."

Inhibiting access could be a major blow, city officials and tourism leaders fear.

"We have three places where you go into Miami Beach," Mayor Bower said. "The most popular place for the engine of economics is the south end.... This [tunnel construction] will cause a disruption to the City of Miami Beach, to the convention center, which is a regional issue for all of us. And I need to feel very comfortable also that the residents that live nearby are going to not be disturbed all the time."

She and other Beach leaders have been asking why the tunnel dig has to begin on Watson Island, gateway to the Beach for residents and visitors, rather than Dodge Island, the port side.

They got their answer two weeks ago.

Tunnel contractors say a change in the starting point now "would set them back a year on the project schedule," said Alice

Bravo, local district director of transportation systems development for the Florida Department of Transportation.

Before she could continue, Miami-Dade Commission and Metropolitan Planning Organization Chair Dennis Moss chimed in to ask for a full presentation on tunnel logistics to the transportation planning board.

Ms. Bravo agreed, but quickly piped back up to put on record that the construction reconfiguration Beach proponents are proposing "would be a deal breaker, pretty much, for the project."

In an interview later, she added that "a project like that that has such an intricate financing structure and the timing associated with that financing - we have commitments to USDOT [the federal transportation department] because of the TIFIA [Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act] loans - I think it's not feasible to set back a project like that one year."

Ms. Bravo pointed out also that

the contractor's bid for the project was "based on this design."

It's fair for Beach leaders to ask the question, she said. But changing plans would disrupt a deal that has nearly been broken many times over the years.

Experts for more than two decades studied options for removing rumbling cargo trucks from downtown Miami and improving access to the port, with twin underwater tunnels connecting Watson Island and the port consis-

tently emerging as the answer.

The state in 2007 selected a contractor team to finance, design, build, operate and maintain the \$1 billion-plus tunnels, but it took years to seal the deal, with government funding and then private financing concerns jeopardizing the long-planned project.

The project reached commercial and financial close last year.

Since then, preliminary tunnel work has begun, with a groundbreaking for road construction planned for early June.

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