

Extension of 836 expressway into Kendall wins key vote in Miami-Dade | Miami Herald



A rush hour view of the 836 expressway. Miami-Dade commissioners approved a \$650 million plan to extend the toll roads 14 miles southwest into West Kendall. MIAMI HERALD

[MIAMI-DADE COUNTY](#)

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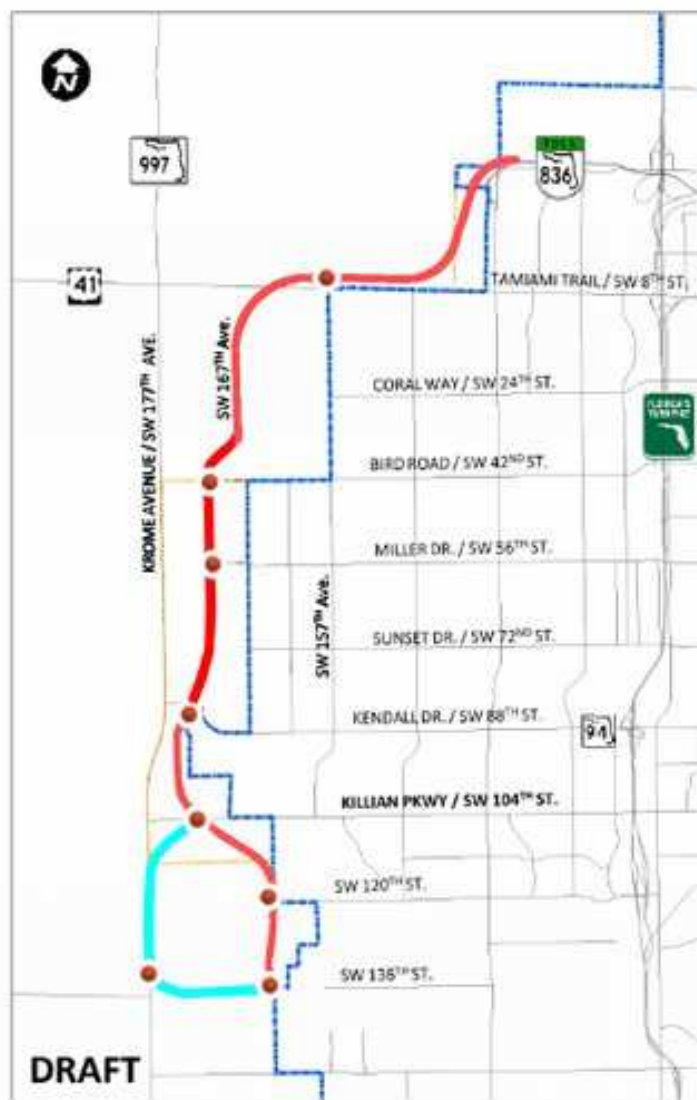
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Miami-Dade commissioners on Wednesday gave preliminary approval to [extending the 836 expressway 14 miles into West Kendall](#), rejecting warnings about environmental damage and urban sprawl in favor of bringing relief to commuters in the congested suburbs.

"We've got to start somewhere," said Commissioner Javier Souto, whose district includes western areas in the county. "Do something. Do something."

A final vote awaits later this year, but the 9-2 vote captured what appeared to be broad support for the signature transportation package from Mayor Carlos Gimenez, who cited the toll road's extension as a top priority as he prepares to leave office in 2020.

The expressway route crosses the county's Urban Development Boundary, which separates protected lands from the more permissive zoning that allows residential subdivisions and shopping centers.



LEGEND

 2020 Urban Development Boundary

 2030 Urban Expansion Area

 Corridor 1

 Corridor 2

 Potential Interchange Locations

- **Unincorporated Miami-Dade**

- **Study area bounded by**

- NW 12th Street to the north
- SW 136th Street to the south
- SW 152nd Avenue to the east
- SW 177th Avenue (Krome Ave.) to the west

- **15-mile New Transportation Link**

- **Multimodal corridor**



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Miami-Dade County commissioners vote 9-2 to move forward with plans to extend Dolphin Expressway across wetlands.

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The vote marked a milestone moment for a controversial \$650 million highway proposal that has lingered in planning stages for years and suffered several legislative defeats in commission committees since last year. Construction, funded by tolls, would create another north-south option for about 600,000 residents of Kendall and surrounding neighborhoods who currently have to choose between Krome Avenue to the west and Florida's Turnpike to the east.

Environmental groups pointed to a string of severe consequences from building the six-lane highway through wetlands, sensitive areas and land over wellfields that are vital to the county's water supply. Wearing "Hold the Line" stickers, one opponent after another warned that the undeveloped land is needed to absorb western flooding that will threaten the area as seas continue to rise.

By putting the road in the middle of the basin, environmentalists warn the county may be limiting Everglades restoration work still being planned by the South Florida Water Management District. The Bird Drive basin,

wetlands to the west of the Urban Development Boundary, had been earmarked for flood control but water managers later determined not all the land was needed.

"We've spent years and millions of dollars to try to combine that land to better the community," said Laura Reynolds, a consultant for the Friends of the Everglades and other environmental groups. "It is an expensive project and it is not yet done."

Gimenez pointed to safeguards in the application aimed at protecting water supplies, acquisition of new lands to replace wetlands lost, development restrictions and new nature trails and bike paths aimed at reassuring critics.

"I actually share most of the concerns of the environmentalists," he said. "But most of those concerns were addressed."

Developers back the plan, which would extend a major commuting route past land where they have been seeking changes for years in the Urban Development Boundary in order to build.

While changing the county's Comprehensive Master Development Plan only required seven votes on the 13-seat commission, expanding the Urban Development Boundary requires a two-thirds vote. Still, critics called extending the 836 a guarantee that intense development would follow, adding even more traffic to the area and choking the new expressway.

"It's unrealistic to think that no more development will happen and more cars will not get on the road after this highway is built," said Rebecca Willett, who lives in West Kendall.

"I'm concerned it will be a bait and switch," said Commissioner Daniella Levine Cava, who joined Xavier Suarez in casting the two No votes. "Developers are already waiting to push new development. I've spoken to some of them."

With the preliminary vote for approval, the commission transmitted the proposed change in the comprehensive development plan to state regulators. The Miami-Dade Expressway Authority, the toll agency that runs the 836 and proposed the extension, expects to bring it back to the county for a final vote later this year. A second favorable vote would allow the MDX to pursue contractors and start construction in 2019, said Javier Rodriguez, the toll agency's director.

But hurdles remain. The MDX needs to swap out some acreage from the federal Department of the Interior for the expressway, and Washington has traditionally resisted that kind of exchange. MDX also has to acquire land from private owners, which can lead to litigation. A coalition of environmental groups this week wrote Miami-Dade with objections to the 836 plan, hinting at a lawsuit over the effort if it proceeds.

Gimenez led the campaign for the extension, including rebranding the southwestern leg of the 836 as the "Kendall Parkway." Critics countered with their own slogan: the Snakeway, for its threat to the Everglades. The MDX used its toll dollars to fund an extensive campaign to pressure commissioners to approve the project, including emails to its toll payers and mailing out what Gimenez said were 20,000 cards inviting recipients to state their position on the extension. But those cards offered recipients only one choice — to endorse the 836 — with no option to oppose.

Kendall commuters filled town hall meetings this year urging support for the extension and showed up in large numbers Wednesday demanding help with traffic congestion instead of more debate.

"West Kendall is choking while you study these issues to death," said Gary Held, a Kendall resident.

MDX has not yet settled on a final route for the proposed expressway, a bone of contention for critics, who say the approval process is being rushed. Without a final route, regulatory agencies including the South Florida Water Management District and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers have also been unable to issue recommendations. Agency officials said the final route will be presented before the commission's second vote.

Conflicts of the proposed Dolphin/836 Expressway extension with the Everglades restoration plan



Celeste De Palma, Director of Everglades Policy of Audubon Florida, talks about conflicts of the proposed Dolphin/836 Expressway extension

By Pedro Portal / pportal@miamiherald.com ✉

Controversy over extending a major highway past the Urban Development Boundary had MDX drawing a preliminary route hugging Kendall neighborhoods, while residents pushed for an alignment that was farther west. Last-minute changes did push the proposed expressway about 600 yards to the west, and the existing proposal includes alternative southern legs, with one about a mile farther west than the other.

Commissioner Audrey Edmonson warned she would switch her Yes vote to a No if the MDX comes back with a final route that moves too far beyond the boundary.

"I will not support this if it goes father west," she said.

Opponents called the extension plan a capitulation on Miami-Dade's transit struggles, with efforts to expand Metrorail languishing in ongoing studies and debates over funding. The Miami Transit Alliance, an advocacy group, [created a parody website](#) touting the proposed 836 extension as "another sexy highway," including a theme song with lyrics like "Public transportation is for communist losers."

Rep. Javier Fernandez, D-Miami, one of the first speakers in the daylong hearing in downtown Miami, pointed to state legislation requiring MDX to spend surplus dollars on transit projects. He said that should mean \$85 million for Miami-Dade's "SMART" Plan, a framework for expanding transit on six major commuting corridors, but not the proposed extension route.

"This project will take the MDX out of the transportation project going forward," he said.

But the MDX and Gimenez contend that most of the toll agency's cash is tied up, and that the hundreds of millions of dollars needed for the extension is only possible with miles of new tolled highways. Beyond that, Gimenez said approving an MDX extension shouldn't distract Miami-Dade from its transit plans.

"People say here's the solution: More roadways? Nope. More transit? Nope. It's actually all of the above. There is no silver bullet," Gimenez told commissioners before the vote. "It's almost insulting that somehow we're myopic. That if we do this roadway, that's the only thing we're going to do. I think we can walk and chew gum at the same time."

Commissioner Joe Martinez, who represents West Kendall, called the extension a matter of fairness for the western suburbs who pay the county's half-percent transportation tax but have no transit options beyond the Miami-Dade bus system.

"They have been paying the half cent, at almost \$400 per household per year," Martinez said. "And received nothing for it ... except traffic gridlock."

Jose "Pepe" Diaz, whose district includes the existing 836, said it didn't make sense to block the new expressway on the basis of a wishful demand for public transit.

"This is about a need," he said. "I haven't heard any other solution, except: 'Let's build a train.' How? Where? When? And what would it cost? This is a start of something."

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