

Mayor fighting for a new toll highway into Kendall, past the development boundary | Miami Herald

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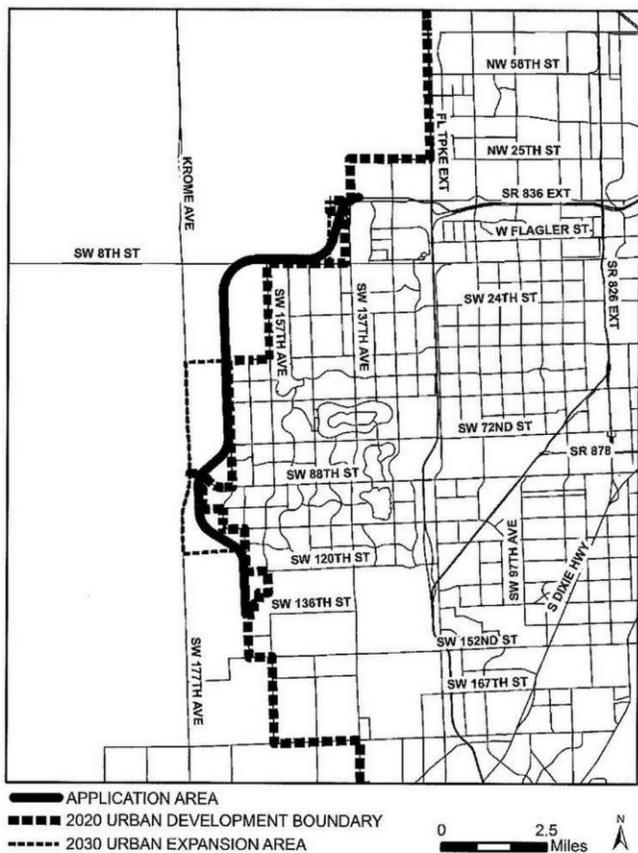
Gimenez delivers State of the County speech



The speech touted the county's declining unemployment rate and record traffic levels at Miami International Airport and PortMiami, while promising more efforts on public safety, economic development, parks and solar power. The speech touted the cou By McClatchy

Urging county leaders not to neglect the vast majority of residents who drive, Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez used a high-profile speech Tuesday to champion the extension of the Dolphin Expressway south into Kendall while resisting calls for a quick expansion of Metrorail into different suburbs.

"Today, approximately 95 percent of our residents commute via personal vehicles. And for the foreseeable future, the majority of our residents will continue to use their personal vehicles," Gimenez said during his 2018 State of the County address, a report required by the Miami-Dade charter. "We must continue to improve our roadway network."



plan for 836 extension

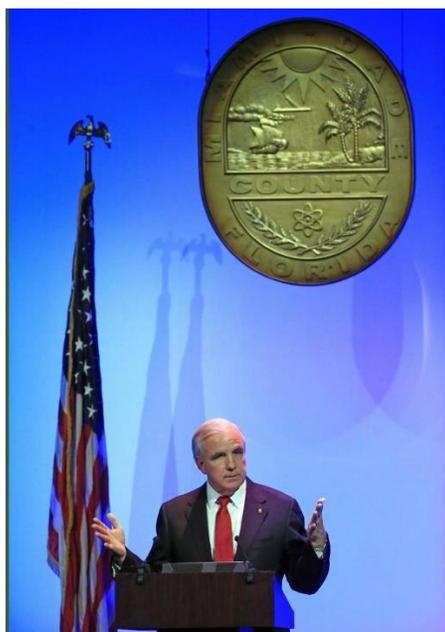
A proposal by the administration of Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez to extend the Dolphin Expressway (State Road 836) southwest in Kendall. The bold line shows the proposed route, while the longer dotted line shows the current edge of the county’s Urban Development Boundary. The smaller dotted line shows where the boundary would move if certain growth targets were met.

Miami-Dade County

Those words came during a passage on the county’s new computer-synched traffic lights, which Gimenez said will improve commuting times for motorists and bus passengers. He also cautioned against budget-busting and time-consuming extensions of Metrorail at a time when the county could actually afford a new high-tech bus system. And he previewed a renewed effort to use toll dollars to construct a six-lane expressway as a new commuting option from the suburbs.

Recently, the mayor’s director of Regulatory and Economic Resources submitted an application to the department he

supervises requesting that staff approve the proposed 13-mile extension of the existing Dolphin Expressway, a highway known as State Road 836 that is run by the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority. The busiest toll road in Miami-Dade, the extended expressway would take a southwest turn and move past Miami-Dade’s Urban Development Boundary, an imaginary line intended to shield the Everglades and agricultural land from residential subdivisions and strip malls.



Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez gives his 2018 State of the County Address at the Miami-Dade County Auditorium on Tuesday, Jan. 30, 2018. AL DIAZ - adiaz@miamiherald.com

Environmentalists and slow-growth advocates have already fought back attempts to have the County Commission endorse the plan. Gimenez promised to try again, and this time is having Miami-Dade itself apply for the change within the county's own zoning system.

"I also strongly support the extension of the 836 west, which we will call the Kendall Parkway for our suburb and the Kendall neighborhoods," he said before an audience of about 200 officials, county executives, lobbyists and vendors. "This can be done by protecting against development outside the UDB while bringing relief to 600,000 residents of West Kendall and South Dade."

The new highway would extend the Dolphin south at Northwest 137th Avenue until it heads west again, parallel to Southwest Eighth Street. Then it runs south on a track that parallels Southwest 167th Avenue, before ending with a connection at Southwest 136th Street. The idea is to give Kendall commuters an option to head west and pick up a faster route north and east into the Miami area, rather than having to make their way through local roads to the Florida Turnpike, which connects with the Dolphin.



Immigration activist Yuleidy Cristina Gonzalez-Nieto joined a small group criticizing Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez on immigration during a press conference in front of the Miami-Dade County Auditorium, where Gimenez was giving his state of the county speech, on Tuesday, Jan. 30, 2018. Roberto Koltun - rkoltun@miamiherald.com

Laura Reynolds, a consultant for the Friends of the Everglades group, said Gimenez should let the expressway authority apply for county approval since having the mayor's deputy request the review all but assures a thumbs up from his own staff. While building the highway past the development boundary won't change any growth restrictions, Reynolds said creating the new north-south route

would naturally lead to extending the more permissive development zone to the highway's edge.

"If you build a road, you are putting pressure on that area for development," she said, arguing Miami-Dade should restrict western expansion in order to make projects closer to the urban core more viable. "It's really sprawl versus density."

While the fight over the 836 expansion goes back years, Gimenez used his speech to refresh his case and highlight the new effort by MDX and his administration to give the highway an identity beyond the Dolphin. The push for the Kendall Parkway coincides with a growing debate over the future of transit in Miami-Dade, with Gimenez proposing a plan for high-tech buses serving Metrorail's north and south stations and Commission Chairman Esteban "Steve" Bovo leading a charge for expanding the rail system itself.

Gimenez cited the divide, noting "sometimes Chairman Bovo and I have different perspectives when it comes to transit." But the mayor pitched his plan as a waypoint between the two approaches, since it calls for acquiring land along Northwest 27th Avenue for building a dedicated busway and adding stations along the existing busway in South Dade to allow for group boarding, pre-ticketing, an air-conditioned wait area and other rail-like perks that come with a "rapid-transit" bus system.

That land and those stations could be used to serve an expanded Metrorail system if Miami-Dade ever found the money to build it, Gimenez said, while allowing for a new mode of bus options for commuters — and one that could be created relatively quickly.

“We need to give the people relief now,” Gimenez said. “We cannot wait.”

The speech touted the county’s declining unemployment rate and record traffic levels at Miami International Airport and PortMiami, while promising more efforts on public safety, economic development, parks and solar power.

Gimenez did not address a group of immigrant-rights advocates who protested outside. They criticized the Republican mayor for reversing county policy under President Donald Trump to begin honoring federal detention requests for suspected immigration offenders brought to a Miami-Dade jail.

“Shame on Mayor Gimenez,” Juan Cuba, chairman of the county’s Democratic Party, said at a press conference before the morning speech. “This is part of the larger Trump deportation plan. He is part of that.” The County Commission later backed Gimenez’s 2017 change, which restored county policy to where it was in 2013.

Inside, Gimenez praised county efforts to improve transit amid service cutbacks and funding shortfalls. He noted a new two-car Metrorail train was put in service the day of his speech, though a schedule released last summer had promised a four-car train in January.

Gimenez also praised the county’s \$160 million program to install “smart” traffic lights that use computer algorithms and traffic sensors to better sync green lights in patterns that encourage traffic flow. Those lights, he said, should soon speed commuting times for bus passengers along the county’s lone dedicated busway, which runs in exclusive lanes parallel to U.S. 1 in South Dade. Traffic lights are being tested to give buses priority as they head north and south along the route, improvements that Gimenez said are already reducing travel times on county buses from the Homestead area. He also said he supported county funding for a new Tri-Rail line that would run on private tracks owned by the for-profit Brightline railway prepared to launch service into downtown Miami later this year.

The rail-versus-bus debate could reach a head this year as consultants submit recommendations for what transit modes make the most sense for each of the six corridors in Miami-Dade’s SMART Plan. Largely mirroring the Metrorail expansion promised voters in 2002 in exchange for a half-percent sales tax, the plan is pursuing rail or rapid-bus routes in Kendall, north and south from Metrorail, from Miami to Miami Beach, parallel to the Dolphin and northeast along Brightline.

Bovo wants Miami-Dade to focus its effort on the north and south routes and prove to residents it can expand Metrorail somewhere. That would cost at least \$1 billion, according to county estimates, and the budget currently can’t support that or the tens of millions of extra dollars needed to run the expanded system.

Gimenez argued against that approach in his address, saying Miami-Dade should be realistic and pursue options affordable enough to be implemented countywide.

“Let me be clear: We have six corridors and a finite amount of funding at this time. We need to implement practical options that all parts of the county, via six corridors, can benefit from — rather than concentrating all of our resources on a single corridor to fuel development. We cannot allow perfect to be the enemy of the good.”

Bovo noted the county’s Transportation Planning Organization, a board that includes the 13-member County Commission, has already approved focusing on the north and south corridors when it comes to transit funding. “Some people asked me afterward if this was at me,” Bovo said of Gimenez’s address. “To be perfectly honest with you, north-south is what the TPO said is going to be the corridor.”

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