

Mass Intransigence

Written by Jen Karetnick -- BT Contributor
February 2013

Even as transportation options expand, the Shores seems stuck in the past



In January, my students at Miami Arts Charter School and I were invited to participate in the March 8-9 opening of the Purple Transit Line station. Located beneath the I-195 overpass at NE 2nd Avenue and 36th Street, the station offers art, poetry, music, and even a café passengers can enjoy while they wait for their bus or other mode of public transportation.

There's only one problem: The Purple Transit Line and the station don't really exist.

While my students will be composing poetry for it -- along the lines of what the Poetry in Motion campaign does for New York City's Metropolitan Transportation Authority -- the project is actually an art installation, the message of which is obvious: In a metro area of 2.5 or so million residents, mass public transportation, built in a civic and creative manner, has become increasingly necessary.

Our involvement with the Purple Line project has, as it is intended to do for everyone in Miami, made me think. And I have plenty of time for that. Nearly every day on my way to drop off or pick up my kids at school, I'm trapped behind an endless cargo train traveling the Florida East Coast Railway (FEC). At night, insomniac that I am, the nearby train whistles awaken me at least twice.

I doubt I would find this as frustrating if rail service were an option for residents of Miami Shores. Given that the tracks run through the center of the village, it would make sense to have a station where commuters could easily hop on a train and be in downtown Miami, Fort Lauderdale, or even Orlando in time-saving comfort that also reduces noise pollution and improves air quality.

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But easy train travel, whether for business or tourist reasons, probably will not be an option for residents of Miami Shores. Despite operable, clean-fuel plans from Amtrak, the Florida Department of Transportation and the South Florida Regional Transportation Authority (SFRTA) -- which operates Tri-Rail -- to co-develop routes along the FEC right-of-way, as well as private companies seeking to install passenger trains, the village will not likely be among the proposed station sites.

The FEC's "All Aboard Florida" proposal calls for a quiet, high-speed route from Orlando to Miami, with the closest station to Miami Shores located in downtown Miami or (possibly) Fort Lauderdale.

As Miami becomes even more congested, Biscayne Boulevard traffic backs up practically onto our lawns, and it takes an hour to travel ten minutes, it's clear that something is going to happen. No matter who succeeds in securing funds and approval, more FEC tracks (and improved tracks) are needed for the railways to expand from freight to passenger service. So like it or not, we can expect rail construction to commence in the Shores at some point in the next two years, as the FEC is planning to have the Miami-to-Orlando "All Aboard Florida" route operational by 2014.

After that, many more trains will be coming through. Aside from the potential increase in driving delays from construction and train traffic, rail lines will not likely impact Miami Shores negatively *or* positively. But shouldn't they?

Between Publix and the series of homes and churches on the west side of the existing tracks, we have unused land where litter collects and stray animals make their hideouts. Much of that is FEC-owned property. Why not petition them and the developers of the rail lines to put this land to good use, fight for a station and a stop to be placed here?

Okay, I know that's wishful thinking. For one thing, the FEC hasn't even installed safe pedestrian crossings on our tracks; I cringe every time I see someone hauling groceries over the tracks by Publix, or jogging over the tracks on NE 96th Street. (Crossings do exist, but I don't believe they're safe.)

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Plus we don't even have a viable downtown, owing mostly to a lack of sewage connections and concerns that too much of a good thing (restaurants, retail) will attract rowdy crowds that will overrun our little community. So I can't see how village leaders would support a rail station, even if we did make it an architectural gem and decorate it through local art and literacy initiatives -- or even if it did bring us the benefits of foot traffic, revenue, and increased home values.

Of course, to build a station, we'd also have to create a parking lot, as denizens of neighboring towns will want to take the train from here, just as some of us will want to board in Aventura. And maybe there's just not enough land for that -- though that stumbling block, too, could be overcome. Add on to the top of Publix, for instance, where there's already a parking structure.

Oh, but the cost! The eyesore! So maybe we can look at installing other options, such as courting environmentally friendly car-sharing companies like Car2Go, whose tiny vehicles I see on the street, available for rent all over downtown, Brickell, Edgewater, the Design District, and the Upper Eastside.

But even if we never get a train station here -- and I can accept that it's a pipe dream -- Miami Shores residents would do well to start thinking about how we might get to a station without driving our own cars there and adding to, instead of decreasing, congestion and pollution on our main corridors. (I use the plural lightly.)

One word (or is it two?): DecoBike.

A bike-sharing system that is already in effect in Miami Beach and Surfside (and soon, if not already, in Bay Harbor Islands and the City of Miami), DecoBike's system is simple: Insert a credit card or your membership card and rent a bike, ride it to wherever you need to go, and return it to a rack near your destination. So basically, if you live in Surfside or Miami Beach, you can rent a bike there, ride it to work in downtown Miami, leave it there, and then rent a second bike to return home.

Access passes cost as little as \$4 for 30 minutes to \$35 for all-month use (with lots of options in

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between). DecoBikes are available 24/7, and even the vendor stations are clean and green: They're solar-powered. The bikes themselves -- with pedal-powered headlights and taillights, sturdy baskets, and adjustable seats -- are built for city travel.

What do DecoBikes not have? A home in Miami Shores, where, though we have cars and bikes of our own, we barely have parking spaces or bike racks, let alone a car- or bike-sharing program. Or a train station.

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