

Thumbs turn down for traffic mitigation plan at Ives Dairy Road



Anticipating as many as 100 trains a day, the Florida Department of Transportation is planning to build yet another flyover just west of Aventura.

Costing \$28.5 million to build, the proposed flyover is designed to allow traffic traveling west toward I-95 to bypass the Florida East Coast (FEC) railroad tracks that run parallel to W. Dixie Highway at Ives Dairy Road, also known as NE 203rd Street.

To accomplish this, the flyover will elevate traffic traveling west on Ives Dairy 23.5 feet *above* the train tracks. FDOT engineers are also contemplating new pedestrian crossings and the widening of the current eastbound flyover at NE 203rd Street.

FDOT is scheduled to present its latest plans for the proposed flyover at Aventura City Hall for community input on June 8 from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m.

Construction of this new flyover, should the project proceed, is slated to begin in 2019. By then there will likely be 20 FEC trains carrying freight from an expanded PortMiami and traveling the tracks daily.

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All Aboard Florida's BrightLine will also likely be online, sending passenger trains along the tracks to the downtown areas of Miami, Fort Lauderdale, West Palm Beach, and Orlando 32 times a day.

FDOT is also factoring another 48 daily train trips from Tri-Rail's Coastal Link, a proposed system that would carry passengers to various stations along the FEC tracks. Once operational, Tri-Rail Coastal Link would operate from downtown Miami to Jupiter Inlet, and include stations within the Biscayne Corridor in Midtown Miami, Little Haiti, North Miami, North Miami Beach, and the Aventura-Ojus area. Except for MiamiCentral, a downtown station complex being developed by All Aboard Florida near the county's government center, the locations for other Coastal Link stations have yet to be determined.

Even without the dramatic increase in train crossings, vehicular traffic on NE 203rd Street is already very bad, notes Ivette Ruiz-Paz, a media specialist for FDOT. "Ives Dairy Road is currently extremely congested, and the future increase in freight and passenger trains will only worsen congestion," she states in an e-mail to the *BT*. "This project proposes a proactive solution to this heavily congested area."

That solution will come at a cost. Another \$19.5 million has been budgeted for "right-of-way acquisition and relocation." That's because as many as 26 businesses on the west side of W. Dixie Highway in unincorporated Ojus, between NE 203rd and NE 206th streets, must be demolished in order to build the flyover.

Various business operators located within the future construction area tell the *BT* they don't want to move. "It's a problem. We'll have to leave here after 25 years," says David Shalem, owner of Aventura Brakes, one of several businesses located in Aventura Auto Mall at 20400 W. Dixie Highway. During that time, Shalem says, he's cultivated a loyal customer base from the surrounding area. "I hope it doesn't happen," he adds.

Scott Alan also hopes the flyover isn't built. For the past 25 years, he's run a hair salon in a strip mall at 20504 W. Dixie Highway. "I've built my brand here," he says. "It affects my livelihood tremendously, especially as a small-business owner."

Denisse Guenoun says she's run her bakery, Praline Pastries, at the Aventura Auto Mall for the

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past four years. She, too, has created a following in northeast Miami-Dade and southeast Broward. “Everybody knows where I am,” she says. “All my clients know where I am.”

Guenoun questions the point of the project: “It’s going to be very costly and I don’t think it’s going to do any good.” She adds that NE 203rd Street isn’t the only roadway that will be affected by increased train traffic. Other major thoroughfares transecting Biscayne Boulevard that cross over the railroad are NE 186th Street, NE 172nd Street, NE 163rd Street, NE 151st Street, and NE 146th Street. To the west of Biscayne Boulevard, NE 135th Street, NE 16th Avenue, NE 123rd/125th Street, and NE 107th Street also have railroad crossings.

“At the moment, additional flyovers are not being considered in Aventura, North Miami Beach, and North Miami, but in the future it can be a possibility,” Ruiz-Paz tells the *BT*.

So why start with 203rd Street? “All FDOT projects originate from the Metropolitan Planning Organization,” Ruiz-Paz answers, referring to Miami-Dade’s federally mandated entity governed by county and city officials tasked with looking at road and transit improvements.

Miami-Dade County Commissioner Sally Heyman, whose district covers the Aventura area, says NE 203rd Street became a priority thanks to the additional traffic generated from Sunny Isles Beach, a community that grew from 15,300 people in 2000 to 21,600 people in 2014.

“The main road connecting the mainland of Aventura to Golden Beach and Sunny Isles Beach is Ives Dairy Road,” Heyman explains. Ives Dairy Road is already congested. Throw in several dozen train trips daily and the effect will be crippling, the commissioner predicts.

The state looked at converting Ives Dairy into a double-decker road in the late 1980s. Following opposition from surrounding communities, FDOT went with the construction of a \$29.4 million eastbound flyover that was completed in November 2000.

In spite of the flyover’s construction, the NE 203rd Street intersection “absolutely gridlocks every time a train goes by,” Heyman says.

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The unincorporated Ojus area, which includes the communities of Skylake and Highland Lakes, is growing up, too. Just south of the existing flyover, a 400-unit apartment community called Gables Aventura is now being built on 16 acres.

William Clayton, a Highland Lakes homeowner for the past 18 years, hates the project. “This is the fastest, cheapest, most unsightly design they could come up with,” complains Clayton, who predicts the flyover will bring noise pollution; eliminate a potential tax-base for the Ojus region, should it decide to incorporate as a city; and do little to alleviate traffic.

Lenny Feldman, past president of the Skylake-Highland Lakes Area Homeowners Association, thinks FDOT should take a hard look at the traffic challenges for the entire region, instead of just Ives Dairy Road.

Says Feldman: “Within the next few months or so, they should stop, take a deep breath, and look at the entire traffic flow of the area.”

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