

Out of Sync and Seeing Red

Written by Francisco Alvarado, BT Contributor
August 2018

Biscayne Boulevard's "smart" traffic light technology has a steep learning curve



Over the past 16 months, local Realtor Donald Wilson has become an observant student of the traffic light patterns along Biscayne Boulevard, particularly near his Palm Grove home in Miami's Upper Eastside.

"I see problems all over the county, but here it affects me the most," Wilson tells *Biscayne Times*. "Some days it can take me over ten minutes to go six blocks from 76th Street to 82nd Street. There are days that traffic backs up to 73rd Street and NE 5th Avenue."

A trim man with ocean blue eyes and a salt-and-pepper goatee, Wilson says he pinpointed the problem while stewing in bumper-to-bumper traffic sometime in March of last year.

"On Biscayne, you have four lights in succession at 78th Street, 79th, 81st, and 82nd that are out of sync," he explains. "You have situations where the light at 81st turns red when the light at 82nd turns green."

Wilson says he's made numerous complaints to Miami-Dade's Transportation and Public Works Department about the glitches. Traffic engineers have re-synced the lights, but Wilson maintains that the problem keeps recurring.

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“No one in the county is monitoring when this happens until they get a complaint,” he says. “Even then, it takes them a long time to fix it. The lights are out of sync again, but I haven’t received a response to my last complaint from two weeks ago.”

Wilson’s frustrations are essentially a microcosm of the daunting challenges facing the county’s elected officials and transportation gurus since they began taking steps in recent years to modernize Miami-Dade’s grid of 2884 traffic lights. “I see problems with the traffic lights everywhere on Biscayne Boulevard,” he adds. “And throughout the county, unfortunately.”



Indeed, morning and evening rush hours along Biscayne Boulevard now start earlier and last longer than ever. Thousands of commuters are agonizingly familiar with the choke points, from NE 123rd, 163rd, and 186th streets in the north to a long stretch of the Boulevard from downtown Miami up to NE 36th Street, and again through the Upper Eastside.

Transportation department spokeswoman Karla Damien says Miami-Dade is moving diligently to deploy new technologies, such as so-called smart traffic signals that will expedite travel on county roads, including Biscayne Boulevard.

“We can assure you that our engineers and consultants are working extremely hard to optimize traffic signalization in order to improve traffic flow on that corridor and throughout Miami-Dade

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County,” Damien says. “Soon, Mr. Wilson and thousands of drivers will start to see more green lights and less red-light time on Biscayne Boulevard.”

In July 2017, the Miami-Dade County Commission awarded a two-year, \$11.3 million contract to the traffic-management tech firm Econolite, based in Anaheim, California, to install more than 300 smart traffic signals and 675 video detection cameras along ten major corridors in Miami-Dade after the company completed a pilot program that resulted in a ten percent reduction in travel time along NW 36th Street between 71st and 82nd avenues, according to county documents.

Smart traffic signals rely on computer software to decide when to extend or reduce the timing of a green or red light, as opposed to automatic cycling of green and red lights based on commuting patterns determined by human engineers. Miami-Dade recently went live with smart traffic signals linked to about 100 cameras suspended 20 feet in the air at 34 intersections on U.S. 1 from SW 98th Street north to I-95.

Damien tells the *BT* that the transportation department has installed smart traffic signals, cameras, and corresponding equipment in the nine other designated corridors, including a stretch of Biscayne Boulevard from NE 11th Street to NE 82nd Street. However, the smart traffic signals are still in “learning mode” she notes.

“We are now in the process of adjusting the smart signals’ timing, and programming the controllers in order to maximize travel time savings throughout the corridors,” Damien explains. “This process takes time in order to get it done right. However, we have been expediting the work on all corridors, including Biscayne.”

Transportation department officials, including Frank Aira, the traffic signals and signs division chief, explained the challenges of managing traffic along Biscayne Boulevard and surrounding roadways to Wilson during a June 27 meeting the Realtor requested through the office of county Commissioner Audrey Edmonson, Damien says.

“We also provided information as to how traffic-signal engineers and consultants have been continuously reviewing Biscayne Boulevard data in order to make the appropriate traffic-signal timing adjustments on this road,” she continues, while disputing that the traffic lights go out of

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sync.

“The things that change are other unpredictable variables along the roadway and surrounding areas, such as construction work, accidents, breakdowns, or special events,” Damien says. “Biscayne is a very heavily traveled arterial, and it is over capacity, as the roadway profile has remained unchanged for the past 40 years, while high density redevelopment has occurred around it.”

Wilson counters that the county should have been investing funds to upgrade Miami-Dade’s traffic lights since voters in 2002 approved a half-penny tax increase for transit and road projects.

“They don’t have enough engineers to actually maintain the lights,” he says. “That infuriates me because it should be one of the number-one priorities for this half-penny tax we have. It should be used where there are the biggest traffic problems.”

He also insists that the traffic lights at NE 78th, 79th, 81st, and 82nd streets worked properly for about four days after his June 27 meeting with the transportation bureaucrats. “It’s been a month, and they haven’t fixed it,” Wilson says. “In my opinion, all four of those lights should be controlled in unison.”

Indeed, as recently July 25 in the early evening, Wilson’s observations bear out. The traffic light at NE 79th Street turned green at the same time the lights at 81st and 82nd streets turned red. When those lights turned green, 79th Street turned red.

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