

Build It and Bulldoze It?

Written by Erik Bojnansky, BT Senior Writer
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Shorecrest street plan could raze the NE 79th Street business district



The Florida Department of Transportation has presented plans that would widen NE 79th Street by nearly 50 feet to accommodate six lanes for vehicles and bring some traffic relief for the Miami neighborhood of Shorecrest.

But to do it, the state would have to buy private land, perhaps through eminent domain if landowners refuse to sell along NE 79th Street between Biscayne Boulevard and Biscayne Bay to expand the right-of-way. That necessity is particularly acute on the north side of NE 79th Street in Shorecrest, where a burgeoning commercial district filled with stores, offices, and restaurants is located.

The plan, called the Build Alternative 3, is one of three proposals submitted by FDOT for renovations of 79th and 82nd streets in the City of Miami. It's the most expensive of the three plans, and would cost an estimated \$69 million in construction costs alone. It would also force businesses on the north side of NE 79th Street east of Biscayne to shrink or close.

Mark Ingraham, an attorney and 79th Street property owner, says such a plan would kill a commercial district that's in the midst of a renaissance.

"For the sake of the neighborhood and the sake of property values, and the sake of having a walkable street with businesses that will serve the surrounding neighborhood, making 79th Street a six-lane super-highway will be a big mistake," he says. "It'll have a negative impact on the residential neighborhood surrounding the area."

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Nevertheless, the Build Alternative 3 was the plan preferred by Shorecrest residents when the three alternatives were first unveiled at an August 28 neighborhood forum.

“At our last meeting, I asked residents to raise their hands,” says Daisy Torres, president of the Shorecrest Homeowners Association, “and the majority asked for this option, even though in other meetings I’ve attended, commercial interests were opposed to it.”

Torres isn’t sure that many of her neighbors grasp the cost or actual impact it’ll have on businesses along 79th Street. “I actually explained that to them because I was surprised,” she says. “I said, ‘Are you sure? Because this is going to have a big impact.’ Either they didn’t understand or they didn’t care.”

Still, Torres concedes that Build Alternative 3 would address many of the traffic headaches that Shorecrest residents experience. “To me, this is pie in the sky,” she says. “This is a great solution long term -- if we could please everyone. But it’s not a *real* solution.”



Since the 1970s, 79th Street between I-95 and Biscayne Bay has had three vehicular lanes heading east toward the beaches and one lane heading west. Over on 82nd Street, which slices through Shorecrest, there are two lanes heading west. It’s a configuration that has frustrated Shorecrest dwellers for decades. Those complaints intensified following the completion of an \$8.1 million renovation project that further narrowed 79th Street’s single westbound lane, encouraging more cars traveling from the beaches to use 82nd Street. As a result, Shorecresters tell the *BT*, 82nd Street and other streets in Shorecrest are gridlocked by

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commuters during peak hours. During lull traffic times, cars and motorcycles travel along 82nd Street at high speed. (See “[Into the Narrows](#),” October 2016.)

Build Alternative 3 would transform NE 82nd Street into a slower road with one lane heading east and one lane heading west, plus add new island medians along Bayshore Drive. Alternative 3 would also widen 79th Street to 118 feet east of I-95, allowing three lanes of traffic heading east and three lanes heading west, as well as parallel parking and island medians at certain spots. The east- and westbound lanes closest to the sidewalks would be dedicated for bicycles and buses, and separated from the other lanes by a six-inch barrier.

But to make that widening possible, the city needs to acquire private land to create more right-of-way. West of I-95, the land taken would occur on the south side of 79th Street, according to a FDOT map of Build Alternative 3. East of I-95, the seizures would be on the north side.

Gabriel Perez, a Stantec consultant involved in the project, says Build Alternative 3 would likely require 48 feet of right-of-way to be seized east of Biscayne Boulevard on the north side, “although there are some widths that can be played with.”

In some spots that would only mean a loss of parking. However, some buildings on the north side -- including Royal Bavarian Schnitzel Haus, Gastropub 79, Tip Freeman’s Paintings & Art Gallery, and Mina’s Mediterraneo -- are situated right up against the sidewalk.

In contrast, Build Alternative 1 would only cost \$36.5 million and require more modest taking of privately owned curbs in various spots. Under that plan, 82nd Street would also become a two-way road, but without medians, and 79th Street would have two lanes heading east and two lanes heading west without dedicated bus lanes.

The cheapest concept, Build Alternative 2, would cost just \$20.6 million and primarily widens sidewalks and adds bike lanes, says Auraliz Benitez, an FDOT project coordinator. Under that plan, the current number of traffic lanes on 79th Street and 82nd Street are maintained, and there are no right-of-way impacts to private property owners.

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