



MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

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## South Dade mayors warn county against scratching rail plan while awaiting robot cars

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Leaders of two South Dade cities have a warning for Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez: Don't try to convince us to wait for driverless cars when we've been promised a new rail line.

The mayors of Cutler Bay and Palmetto Bay wrote Gimenez this week to protest what they claim was a major reversal during a private May 15 meeting on the county's multi-billion-dollar plan to expand rail countywide.

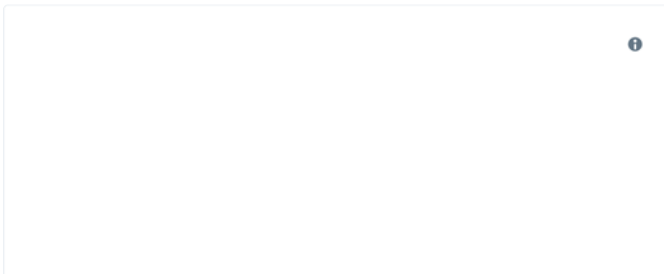
Instead of extending Metrorail south to Florida City, Gimenez reportedly floated the idea of using high-tech buses as a transition to a transportation revolution: the arrival of autonomous cars and their ability to revolutionize highway travel.

"If the county's plan is to abandon what has been promised by way of the SMART plan, then it is only fair that we let the residents know now," read the May 22 letter from Peggy Bell, the mayor of Cutler Bay, and Eugene Flinn, Palmetto Bay's mayor. "However, we want to make it clear that our position has not changed and that we feel that the County is breaking another promise made to the residents which will undoubtedly shake the trust of its constituency."

A Gimenez spokesman released a statement saying it's too early to accuse the mayor of having a firm transit plan for South Dade.

"Mayor Gimenez did not commit to, nor rule out, any option to improve mobility and reduce traffic congestion for our residents in South Miami-Dade," said communications chief Michael Hernández, a top Gimenez advisor who attended the May 15 meeting with the mayors. "The studies being conducted will determine what options are available."

The exchange marks the latest battle line over the SMART Plan, a blueprint for extending transit options to six areas throughout Miami-Dade, including Florida City, South Beach, Miami Gardens, West Kendall and Florida International University. Six new rail lines would cost about \$6 billion, according to a consultant's report, and the price tag is far beyond current county resources.





Big plans, but

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That's left Gimenez to navigate the expectations of an election-year plan unveiled last year with popular goals and daunting finances. One option is to pick one or more routes to pursue and let the others wait until more money becomes available. Another is to find cheaper alternatives to rail in order to reduce costs. While the county assumed six rail lines during a recent presentation on possible SMART costs, the actual plan calls for studying other options.

A primary alternative to rail is a system called bus-rapid-transit. Known as BRT, the option involves buses trying to mimic the most popular elements of commuter rail: large buses make a limited number of stops in dedicated lanes removed from auto traffic, and offer both the group boardings and advanced ticket sales that speed travel on rail cars. It's also dramatically cheaper.

A county study outside of the SMART process last year put the cost of a light-rail system to Florida City at \$1.5 billion, while a new BRT system could be had for about \$115 million.

During an interview last week, Gimenez was asked if he thought bus-rapid-transit made the most sense in some SMART corridors.

"Absolutely I do," Gimenez he said. "Rapid-transit vehicles don't necessarily have to be on rail."

He went on to suggest autonomous vehicles might make costly transit systems obsolete. "New technology is coming," he said. "And that new technology may have tremendous consequences. Automated cars, but also automated buses."

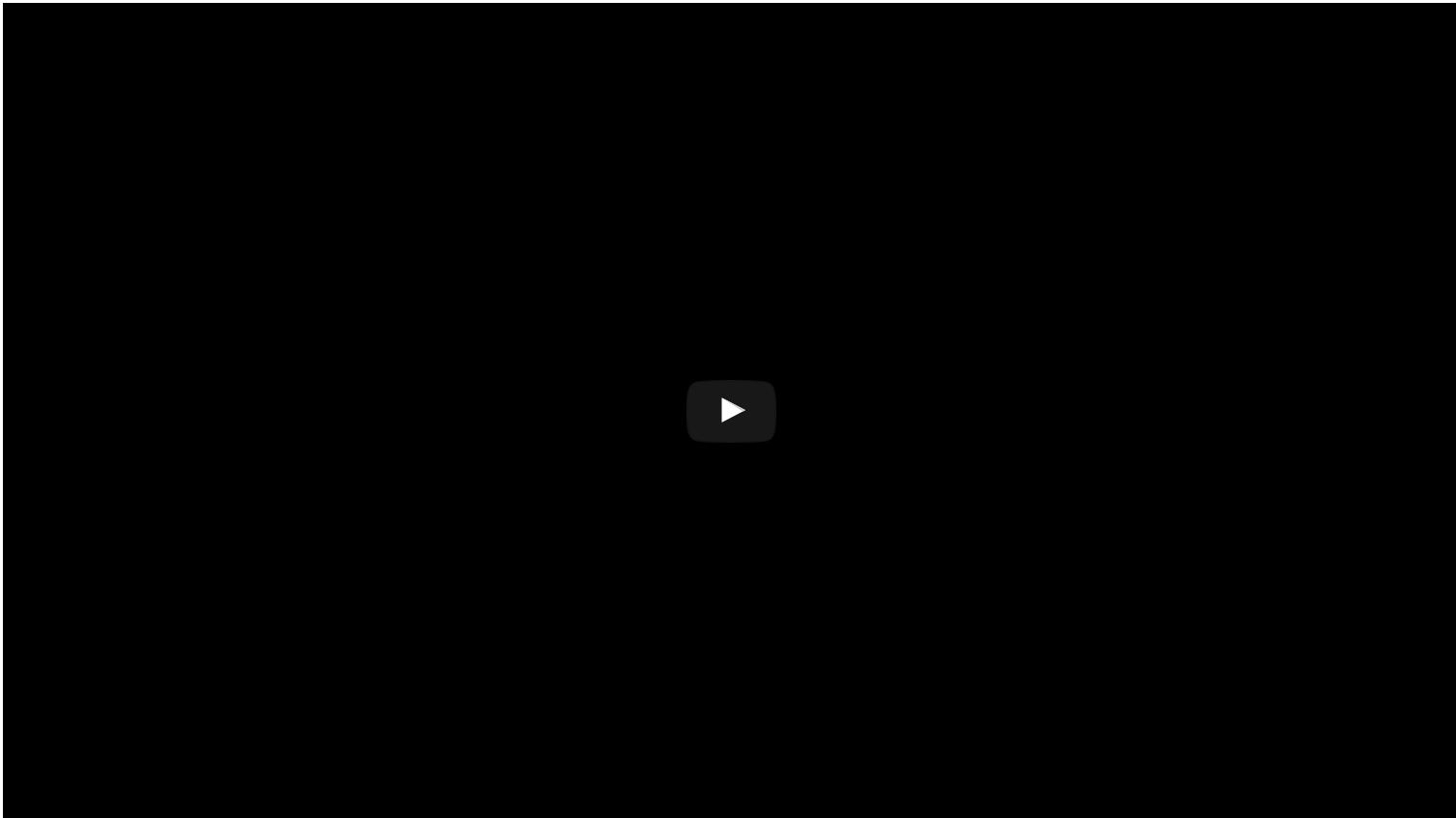
Uber is touting its potential to revolutionize public transit with a 24-hour driverless fleet picking up passengers for small fees and with the kind of precision driving that will allow highways to accommodate far more cars. Pittsburgh is already experimenting with autonomous Uber cars, and the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority plans to design new express lanes to accommodate the hardware needed for future driver-free vehicles. Ford plans to have a fleet of autonomous cars in commercial operation by 2021.

But if automated cars revolutionize humanity's relationship with the automobile — why own a vehicle to leave it parked 22 hours a day when a fleet of robotic cars await? — local leaders aren't ready to ask voters to be patient for a traffic solution.

"We are not rolling over and waiting for automated vehicles," Flinn said. "All I know is I want cars out of our neighborhoods. And I don't want to see more cars. I want to see more transit."

Gimenez enjoyed strong support from South Dade voters in November, and the local mayors said favoring BRT over rail would mean a broken campaign promise. “During [our] meeting, you announced that, despite your support for light rail during your re-election campaign, you no longer support the light rail project are now advocating for autonomous vehicles instead,” the mayors wrote.

In discussing the SMART Plan publicly, Gimenez has avoided endorsing rail for any one route. A Gimenez campaign commercial in 2016 featured him in a Metrorail car talking about the SMART Plan, with “six new transit corridors.” As he spoke in a crowded Metrorail station, a headline on the ad stated: “More Rail Lines.”



Though an advanced bus system can save taxpayers billions of dollars in construction costs and operating expenses, it can’t match the political appeal of a new rail line.

After the study recommended BRT over rail, South Dade mayors refused to back Miami-Dade’s pursuit of a \$30 million federal grant to improve stations along the reserved lanes currently used for express buses there. To resolve the dispute, Miami-Dade promised to design the stations to serve as future rail depots and drop the word “bus” from the system entirely. The 20-mile stretch known as the Busway was renamed the South Dade TransitWay.

“We’ve got fancy buses on the TransitWay right now,” said Dennis Moss, the county commissioner representing South Dade who played host to Gimenez and the mayors for the meeting. He confirmed that Gimenez talked enthusiastically about the prospects of autonomous cars, but Moss said he doesn’t see technology as a solution anytime soon. “I don’t want to be the guinea pig.”



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