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Bovo: Governor should sign bill reducing tolls and raise our quality of life in Miami-Dade

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In 1994, the Florida Legislature and the Miami-Dade County Commission adopted legislation creating the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority, also known as MDX, in an effort to maintain toll dollars in Miami-Dade to improve the quality of life of county residents.

Fast forward 23 years — Miami-Dade’s population has grown to more than 2.6 million residents and out-of-town visitation has nearly doubled; thus, increasing the use of our roadways by both residents and visitors. This combination equals only one thing — ever growing traffic.

The Florida Department of Transportation, Florida’s Turnpike, MDX, and Miami-Dade County have spent billions on expanding the Palmetto Expressway, Don Shula Expressway, Dolphin Expressway, Interstate 95, the Turnpike, and the surrounding roads that support the highway and interstate system.

Many of the dollars that have been spent come from Miami-Dade’s families’ hard-earned paychecks, which are collected by either taxes or tolls.

But still we sit in traffic. Not to mention the billions that taxpayers have already paid out for the People’s Transportation Plan, passed by voter referendum in 2002. Many residents believe it has fallen short on delivering sufficient transportation outcomes.

Tolls are a leading funding source for roadway projects currently planned, under construction, or have already been built, yet these projects have not completely solved our traffic headaches.

Yes, expansion of roadways alleviate our commutes for a short period of time, but not before the roadway once again becomes overly congested.

The big question is, “How do we alleviate traffic and get more people moving efficiently throughout Miami-Dade?”

In comes the Strategic Miami Area Rapid Transit (SMART) plan, which is the county’s comprehensive transportation plan that provides for new transit options for our residents and visitors.

The SMART plan consists of six transit corridors that extends service beyond the existing Metrorail to Aventura, Miami Gardens, Kendall, West Miami-Dade, Florida City, and Miami Beach.

These six transit corridors are estimated to cost anywhere between \$3 billion and \$6 billion in capital expenditures. An area in which MDX and FDOT could assist county residents significantly is by investing into the SMART plan.

MDX alone could invest some of the more than \$200 million toll dollars collected annually from Miami-Dade residents.

During the 2016-2017 legislative session, members of the Miami-Dade delegation filed various pieces of legislation to address the traffic and toll issues facing Miami-Dade residents.

House Bill 1049, relating to expressway authorities by state Rep. Bryan Avila and under the leadership of Rep. Jeanette Nunez and Sens. Anitere Flores and Rene Garcia, passed both the House and Senate unanimously.

This legislation provides that MDX contribute between 20 percent and 50 percent of surplus revenues into Miami-Dade projects that are selected by the county's Transportation Planning Organization.

The legislation also requires MDX to provide drivers with a rebate program, regulates and extends the distance between tolling points, places new restrictions on toll rate hikes, and cut tolls by between 5 percent and 10 percent.

The surplus revenues from MDX could provide funding for the corridors of the SMART plan that represent millions of dollars that Miami-Dade needs for development and construction of such projects.

Assuming that the expressway authority follows its 2017 budget, the county can expect to tap into at least \$20 million in surplus revenues. This represents anywhere from \$4 million to \$10 million annually to be bonded for capital investments of the SMART plan.

The Miami-Dade Commission has unanimously adopted resolutions in support of this MDX reform legislation and has worked toward having the reforms adopted by the Florida Legislature to provide residents relief from the financial burdens caused by the tolls and create alternatives via mass transit.

I urge Gov. Rick Scott to sign this much-needed piece of legislation into law. This bill not only benefits all hard-working residents of Miami-Dade by reducing tolls and providing further accountability of tolls revenue, it also provides the next step in developing transportation options in our county.

They will provide a better quality of life for all who live, work and visit Miami-Dade.

Esteban Bovo, Jr. represents District 13 and is the chairman of the Miami-Dade County Commission and past chair of the Transit and Mobility Services Committee. His newly created Chairman's Policy Council will tackle the most urgent problems the county faces within two and four years. Finding innovative transportation funding solutions tops the list.



Bovo



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