

# Miami-Dade approves new 836 expressway to Kendall, past the urban development line

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Miami-Dade commissioners on Thursday approved a [new 13-mile expressway into Kendall](#), citing traffic congestion in the suburbs and rejecting warnings from environmentalists that allowing the road to cross the county's western development boundary would bring sprawl that endangers water supplies and the Everglades.

The proposed \$1 billion "Kendall Parkway" would go through undeveloped farms and wetlands to connect the existing State Road 836 expressway to South Dade, crossing the county's Urban Development Boundary, which was designed to separate intense residential and commercial development from the Everglades.

The 9-4 vote was a loss to the "Hold the Line" coalition of environmental groups that fight western development and a victory for West Kendall residents who have urged Miami-Dade to provide relief from traffic in an area not served by the county's Metrorail system.

"This was all done just for them. Those are the big winners in today's vote," Mayor Carlos Gimenez said of residents along the proposed route for the six-lane expressway.

The main source of conflict in the debate, the Urban Development Boundary, remains in place after the County Commission's vote. The board granted changes in land-use rules sought by the independent Miami-Dade Expressway Authority to allow construction of the new toll road. The MDX toll board would build the highway, and pay for it with tolls collected on the existing system and on the new extension.

It still must secure federal, state and local regulatory approvals, including another approval by the County Commission for permits to build on and over wetlands. But Thursday's vote was seen as the last significant showdown before elected officials.

"Big, big mistake," said Laura Reynolds, a consultant for the Friends of the Everglades. "This is a bait-and-switch."

Voting against the project on the 13-member county board were Commissioners Audrey Edmonson, Eileen Higgins, Daniella Levine Cava and Xavier Suarez. Like Gimenez, Edmonson also sits on the MDX board.

The commission's decisive vote caps an extended effort by Gimenez to win political support for the project, which died several times in committee as commissioners objected to building a major highway outside the urban development zone.

Gimenez holds an appointed seat on the MDX board, and was named chairman earlier this year. He's used his dual roles to serve as the top public advocate for the 836 extension, a project that first surfaced as an MDX priority in 2007. Gimenez recorded an MDX robo-call that this week urged residents to attend Thursday's hearing.

Once built, the 836 would run south from the existing expressway — known as the Dolphin — along what would be Northwest 137th Avenue if it existed, and end at Southwest 136th Street.



The audience settles in for a day-long meeting of the Miami-Dade commission on Thursday, Sept. 27, 2018, to decide whether to extend State Road 836 into West Kendall.

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Gimenez pitched the 836 extension as a boon to the federal government's multi-decade Everglades restoration effort, since MDX plans to purchase acreage sought by Washington for preservation projects west of the expressway route. That land would be swapped for federal land east of the extension for a wetlands preserve outside of the urban development zone.

MDX must purchase wetlands to compensate for wetlands the highway project will destroy, and the toll agency estimates it needs to acquire at least 1,000 acres to comply with regulations. That's well short of the roughly 2,000 acres sought by Washington for its Everglades restoration project.

That gap could prove problematic if U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio sticks with his demand that MDX purchase all the acreage that Washington needs for its long-stalled Everglades project west of the extension. Rubio said he would ask federal agencies to

oppose the extension without the Everglades help, and his office said Thursday that Miami-Dade understood the requirement remains.

MDX officials stopped short of pledging to buy any more land than would be required under the law. "I'm not going to get into whether we will buy all 2,000 acres," MDX director Javier Rodriguez said in an interview. "We'll do whatever it takes for our permits."

The Gimenez administration also added rules to the 836 approval package designed to prohibit developers within an 80-square-mile zone from using the new expressway in traffic calculations for future projects. Waiving that restriction would require a two-thirds vote by the County Commission, the same margin needed to expand the Urban Development Boundary.

With those protections in place, supporters of the project argued it offered Miami-Dade a chance to provide a speedier, intersection-free commuting route to Miami for a congested area that's not served by the county's Metrorail system. Joe Martinez, the county commissioner representing West Kendall, called it unfair to deny suburban residents a road project over unfounded fears about future development.

"Not everybody wants to be where *you* want to put them," Martinez said. "We like living out west. But we also want to enjoy some of the comforts other people enjoy."

The 836 plan includes a nature trail running the length of the new expressway, and a system of express buses running on the shoulder of the highway.

Tom Rementeria, an insurance agent from the West Kendall area, brought his 11-year-old daughter, Emma, with him to address commissioners before the vote.

"It has been 20 years of gridlock, and we're tired of waiting," he said. "It's very easy for those who don't live on the west side of the county to expect us to take one for the team. They should drive a mile in our shoes."

His daughter spoke next. "I think the highway should be built so I can spend more time with my dad when he gets home," Emma said. "He gets home at a very late

time.”



Zac Cosner of Pinecrest looks at his computer that is adorned with a Hold the Line sticker as he waits in line to address the Miami-Dade commission at a public hearing and commission meeting on Thursday, Sept. 27, 2018, to decide whether to extend State Road 836 into West Kendall.

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The 836 extension wouldn't be the most western road in the area — the route sits east of Krome Avenue and west of the Kendall suburbs. But slow-growth advocates warned building a major expressway beyond the Urban Development Boundary would open the door to a future commission agreeing to extend suburban development to the highway's edge, too.

Environmental groups, including Friends of the Everglades and the Sierra Club, spoke against the project, calling the western areas even more vital as Miami-Dade faces rising sea levels that endanger both its shorelines and its vast underground supplies of drinking water. Drinking water flows east from the Everglades. Critics of the MDX plan dubbed the road the “Snakeway” for intruding on natural habitat, and called it reckless to encourage development on wetlands that should be left as natural

filters for cleaning and preserving ground water.

“We do not need to extend our boundaries further to the west,” said Ruth Trencher, who moved to Miami-Dade in 1943. “It would be catastrophic to do so.”



Garrett Rowe, left, and Lourdes Gomez of the planning department chat with Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez, right, and the mayor’s senior adviser and communications director, Myriam Marquez, over a map on Thursday, Sept. 27, 2018, at a public hearing and commission meeting to decide whether to extend State Road 836 into West Kendall.

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Commissioners granted preliminary approval of the project in June, and MDX has been shifting routes and offering competing alternatives in the weeks since in an effort to win final support for the plan. Kendall residents pushed for a more western route, away from their homes. Some elected officials, including Rubio, called for an eastern alignment as far from the Everglades as possible.

The alignment presented Thursday favored the western alternatives for the upper portion of the proposed highway, but dropped an alternative that would have the lower segment jog a mile-and-a-half jog to the west.

Even so, county regulators said the final route will be determined once wetland studies are completed and MDX seeks final permits. That uncertainty prompted criticism of a rush to win commission approval without crucial details on environmental impacts.

The 836 extension is forecast to generate about \$45 million in tolls a year, and it will cost \$1 to drive from one end to the other, MDX officials said. While existing toll dollars will fund the initial years of construction, MDX notes the vast majority of the money to extend the 836 will come from new tolls on the extension itself.

A state law requires MDX to transfer a portion of surplus dollars to county transit projects. That's prompted critics of the 836 extension to argue it represents skewed priorities when the county should be investing in transit and smart growth instead of highways.

“It is a fantasy to think that it will not lead to more development,” Levine Cava said before voting no. “Our old patterns of urban sprawl will not be avoided if we continually push to have more road options.”