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Opposition building to South Dade expressway

By Ashley Lopez
The Miami Herald

The Miami-Dade Expressway Authority wants to replace the South Miami-Dade Busway with a toll road from Dadeland Mall south, perhaps all the way to Florida City.

The proposal could be good news for commuters who wrestle with U.S. 1 traffic, but some Pinecrest and Falls area residents already are objecting, saying the project could be bad for the community, possibly harming property values and hurting the business district.

Not to worry, MDX officials say: The project is merely in planning stages and will require more public input. Miami-Dade County commissioners would also have to sign off on the plans.

But not everyone is convinced. Mamie Attar, a resident of the Falls area, says she is hoping a collective effort will stop the project before it progresses any further.

"My biggest concern is that this will destroy the neighborhood," Attar said. "They should be concerned in getting more buses for the busway."

State and local transportation departments are looking into whether they can create enough revenue with tolls to build express lanes for cars in the busway. They are hoping changes to the busway will ease traffic and congestion.

The busway is a two-lane highway for buses only. South Dade commuters can use it to reach the Dadeland Metrorail station, where they can continue to downtown Miami.

MDX began a study in the Spring of 2011 with Miami-Dade Transit and the Florida Department of Transportation.

MDX spokeswoman Tere Garcia said that the agencies are only looking into the possibility of these lanes, at this point.

"This is a study," Garcia said. "This is not a project. This is a planning study."

"The goal is to better the transit service and to eventually investigate if there is a potential future for the busway, whether it's park and ride, etc.," Garcia said. "That is what we are looking at. If we cannot prove that that can be done, the study doesn't continue."

But Pinecrest Mayor Cindy Lerner said MDX's plans for the busway are not just preliminary.

"The approach that they are taking to the community is kind of insulting," she said. "It's far more than a study. I think they are just trying to distract everyone from paying attention to it."

Attar has been handing out letters to residents in the areas that would be affected by the changes warning them that the proposed plans would have a devastating effect on property values in the area. Many of those letters have been forward to local officials.

The letters being sent around the area say the plans will create more traffic, rather than reduce it. They also warn that it could bring in faster traffic, more noise, more lanes, pollution and dirt-- and ultimately lower property values.

Garcia said most of the people sending letters to MDX have not been to the meetings her agency already held and are misinformed about what was happening with the project.

"We have had two regular meetings and we have notified everybody," Garcia said. "So, I don't know where they are getting this information."

Attar said she found out about the project by sheer luck. She also said that practically no one in the area that she has talked to even knew there was a study.

"There was zero notice on this," Attar said.

Attar also said that businesses on U.S. 1 were unaware of the project and are now concerned that construction and an unsightly expressway might hurt business.

Garcia said that, right now, MDX is not planning on building an expressway on the busway. But, she said, part of the mission for the busway is to make traffic move faster on U.S. 1. The only way to do that, she said, is to build overpasses to take traffic over side streets and avoid the stoplights.

Lerner said that at the meetings, many of the people that did attend expressed concern.

"Suggestions were falling on deaf ears," she said.

Lerner said she hopes Palmetto Bay and Cutler Bay join her in opposing the plans to the county commissioners whenever they are approached with concrete plans. Attar said she is hoping for the same and ultimately wants to preserve the suburban look of

the Pinecrest/Falls area.

"If this passes, instead of living in a suburb, we are going to be living by I-95," she said.

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