

Executive Summary: Assessment of the Miami Urban Watch Alternative for I-395

Study Coordinated by:
The University of Miami School of Architecture Center for Urban and Community Design

Alternative Developed by:
Miami Urban Watch

Alternative Evaluated by:
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Rebuilding Interstate 395 (I-395) involves far more than traffic planning, engineering or aesthetic matters. I-395 is a complex issue with substantial local and regional socio-economic ramifications affecting everyone in the County.

Conflicting objectives: A major conflict between transportation objectives, Port of Miami needs and urban revitalization concerns lies at the heart of the problem. On the one hand, the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) seeks to widen I-395 in order to correct existing operational deficiencies and provide access to the Port of Miami via a proposed tunnel from Watson Island. On the other hand, I-395 creates substantial social, economic and urban problems for downtown Miami and is a major obstacle to its revitalization. Widening I-395 would aggravate these problems and significantly slow down revitalization efforts.

Pressing needs: This conflict is magnified by the time sensitive and pressing nature of these opposing interests. The Port of Miami, one of the County's most important economic engines, has critical access problems that need to be resolved very soon in order to maintain its competitive edge. Downtown Miami's revitalization is an essential condition for improving Miami's economy and ability to compete regionally. It is also crucial to the success of the Performing Arts Center now under construction. Revitalizing South Florida's urban cores and creating higher density residential mixed-use communities where people can walk or use public transit to get to work is a necessary step for reducing traffic congestion and implementing cost-effective mass transit systems. It is also a key strategy for controlling suburban sprawl, preserving our environment, making better use of available resource and attaining regional sustainability.

A search for a new alternative: Plans for rebuilding I-395 have been on hold for the past eight years because of a lack of funding and considerable opposition by downtown communities such as Overtown, according to FDOT officials. New voices

have joined this opposition in recent years. As the downtown community grows, it is highly likely that this opposition will increase. This will most certainly create an impasse. But such a situation serves no one's interest and would be very costly for the City, the County and the Port. A solution must be found that addresses the full range of issues and balances conflicting objectives. This solution appears to lie more within the range of depressed or belowground alternatives than elevated options.

An obstacles to this search: The search for a balanced solution is severely limited by the FEC tracks running along NW 1st Avenue to the Port of Miami. In order to bring I-395 to ground level alone, the structure must first clear the FEC tracks by 23.5 feet, according to FDOT. Considering 1) the limited distance available between the tracks and the point where the structure would reach the ground, and 2) that the grade of the structure as it ramps downwards cannot exceed a certain percentage, this condition places a very high constraint on what actually can be done. And yet, the FEC tracks provide very little service to the Port. Within the last five years service along these tracks has dwindled from one train per day to one train per week. Considering downtown Miami's growth, it is highly unlikely that this service will increase in the future. Meanwhile, the FEC tracks create a no-man's land that isolates Overtown from the rest of the city. They also generate a corridor of blight along their path and diminish the stature of important landmarks such as the Freedom Tower.

A need to question current assumptions: Under these conditions, it is reasonable to question the validity of the clearance requirement, and raise questions about the FEC tracks and broader Port access issues. Does the minimal service these tracks provide to the Port justify not only limiting the possibility of finding an effective solution for I-395's reconstruction but also keeping Overtown in its present isolated state? Can the FEC right-of-way be put to better use by building a commuter light rail line along this route? Would the Port of Miami



be better served if a cargo rail tunnel were built along the FEC's right-of-way, as a recent Port transportation study suggests, instead of building the proposed truck tunnel from Watson Island to the Port – a project that is far over budget and appears to be at a stand still. These questions suggest that the I-395 issue is far broader than it would first appear. Furthermore, that to solve this problem we must begin by reviewing the validity of current assumptions about I-395, the FEC tracks and other forms of access to the Port.

A need to look at the whole picture: Because I-395's redesign has far reaching implications regarding a wide range of urgent issues, it should be on the front burner of each City and County decision maker. A process must be put in place that gathers the input of all relevant players and stake holders, clarifies objectives, balances needs and creates a comprehensive plan of action. A debate on this matter is urgently needed if we are to make significant headway in dealing with the crucial transportation and urban problems before us.

Intent of proposal: The intent of the Miami Urban Watch Alternative is to present a design strategy for resolving the conflict between the above-mentioned objectives, as well as to show how much can be gained by stepping out of the box and dealing with the whole picture. Its overall aim is to spark discussion about issues that have long been ignored or inadequately addressed.

Premises: The proposal begins from the premise that: 1) FDOT's Preferred Alternative, an elevated structure similar to, but wider than the existing expressway fails to address critical urban revitalization issues, presents far too many problems for future projects in the area, requires a disproportionately high investment in right-of-way land that would essentially be buried beneath the structure, and has major public opposition. For these reasons, it is highly unlikely that it will ever be implemented;

2) A no-build alternative or a continuing delay on this project is not productive. No one gains in the current circumstances; 3) A solution that balances all relevant interests and objectives appears to be available within the range of depressed or underground options – not elevated alternatives. It is imperative to address this situation in order to begin to seek the necessary funding as soon as possible.

Characteristics: Referred to as the Boulevard-Underpass Alternative, the proposal presented here calls for replacing I-395 with a boulevard and an underpass beneath its median for through traffic to Watson Island and Miami Beach. Apart from solving apparently incompatible objectives, its principal objectives are: a) It heals festering conditions in Overtown and Park West; b) It completely transforms the downtown area and turns blighted land into productive high revenue bearing property; c) It creates new land that can accommodate a variety of mixed uses including civic uses such as the Art and Science museums; d) It provides an appropriate urban setting for the Performing Arts Center and integrates this site with Bicentennial Park. Two key features of the proposal need to be highlighted here:

1) The project is designed to be implemented in stages that can be financed as separate packages. The first of these stages, building the boulevard alone, can be implemented at a very low cost within the next three to five years as part of a public works program funded by City or County bond issues.

2) A great deal of land in a prime location will be recuperated when I-395 is torn down. When the value of this land is subtracted from the construction cost, the total cost of this project is far less than expected.

Assessment: This proposal has been evaluated and deemed to be viable and sound by Glatting /Jackson, a prominent traffic-planning firm based in Orlando. It has also been reviewed by FDOT. According to FDOT officials, its principal shortcoming lies in how this proposal deals with the FEC track crossing. This is an issue that involves policy decisions and balancing priorities. As such, it requires substantial analysis and debate on the part of City and County decision makers.

In this study, we have addressed the concerns raised about the Boulevard-Underpass Alternative, and done our best to revise the study in response to the feedback we have obtained. The alternative may still have problems that need to be worked out. But, viewed within the broader picture of Miami's long-range development, there is little doubt that this is not just a viable solution, but also one which can do much to transform Miami now and continue to gain value for years to come. ■