

Metrorail line to the airport almost ready



David Santiago / el Nuevo Herald

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A view of the new Metrorail station at Miami International Airport on Friday January 27, 2012. The new route will be known as the Orange Line and get to the Earlington Heights station is also the first line to open in Miami since 1984. A Metrorail line to Miami International Airport is almost ready after more than two years of construction, and last week local transportation officials offered the first details about how they plan to operate the route marking the first elevated train system expansion since 1984, when the first line opened from Dadeland to a station in Hialeah.

On Friday an El Nuevo Herald reporter and a photographer rode on a test train without passengers from the new Metrorail station at the airport to a point close to the Earlington Heights station, where the new line begins near the intersection of State Road 112, the Airport Expressway, and Northwest 22nd Avenue. It was the first visit of a press organization to the new route, which will be known as Orange Line.

Miami-Dade Transit officials said that they are looking at two options to operate the new line: a train running from the Dadeland South station in South Miami-Dade, or a shorter service from Earlington Heights. The only Metrorail line currently operating runs from Dadeland South to the Palmetto Station, close to Palmetto Expressway north of the county.

The opening of the new line to the airport will mark the beginning of a new era for the system that started operating 28 years ago from Dadeland South to Okeechobee Station in Hialeah. It is the first expansion of the Metrorail system since a small extension of the current line from Okeechobee Station to Palmetto Station, which opened to the public in 2003, was built.

"When this line begins operating we will be serving the main job creator in the region, the airport," said Ysela Llort, MDT interim director. "And this new line was built thanks to the tax approved in 2002 to improve transportation."

Miami-Dade residents pay a half-a-cent sales tax for transportation projects. This tax contributed \$404.7 million to the 2.4-mile line. Another \$101.3 million were received through the Florida Department of Transportation.

The new line between Earlington Heights and the airport began construction in the spring of 2009 and is expected to be finished in the spring this year. But it will not open to the public until the summer. It will first be tested with trains without passengers while new operators are trained, MDT officials said.

The new Metrorail station at the airport is located inside the gigantic transportation center known as Miami Intermodal Center in the eastern part of the terminal.

Besides detailing the plan to open the new Metrorail line, MDT announced that last week the federal government granted \$62.1 million in new subventions to MDT.

The funding indicated that the dispute between MDT and the Federal Transit Administration is on track to be resolved. In late 2010, FTA froze about \$182 million in allocations to MDT, which operates Metrorail, Metrobus and Metromover services.

The new \$62.1 million allocation will be used in part to cover preventive maintenance expenses incurred in fiscal year 2011 and in part for improvements in public transportation and security, among other costs. These funds are not part of the allocations originally suspended in 2010.

MDT uses federal allocations mostly to reimburse itself for previous expenses.

Before, MDT received these reimbursements through a bank transfer electronic system known as ECHO. But in November 2010 FTA abruptly banned MDT from access to the ECHO system and froze allocations for \$182 million. FTA said the decision was made because audits performed revealed weaknesses in the internal financial controls of the county's public transportation agency.

Since then, FTA has gradually restored the allocations, though it has yet to authorize MDT to use the ECHO system.

"FTA is working with MDT to resolve these issues," said an FTA official who asked not to be identified.

"We have made a lot of progress," said Llort. "Our internal controls have improved."

Read more here: <http://www.miamiherald.com/2012/01/28/v-print/2613759/metrorail-line-to-the-airport.html#storylink=cpy>

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