

Free Metromover rides unfair to downtown, leaders lament

BY RISA POLANSKY

Is it time to start charging to ride the Metromover?

Some business leaders think so, predicting a cleaner, safer and better-utilized downtown transit system as a result – one step toward weaning folks off their cars and relieving area congestion.

“In downtown... transit’s got to play a bigger role,” said Miami Parking Authority CEO Art Noriega, acknowledging the comment might sound “weird” coming from a parking guy.

But, he told members of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce’s downtown New World Center Committee at the annual Goals Conference last week, “the fewer cars we get into downtown in the long run, the better.”

Mr. Noriega said he’s mulled a park-and-ride concept to keep cars out of the urban core but has found that many office

workers, especially women, don’t want to ride the people mover for fear it’s unsafe.

The once quarter-a-ride mover being free, Mr. Noriega said, “is a big issue.”

In pushing a sales surtax to fund a People’s Transportation Plan of new projects in Miami-Dade eight years ago, proponents of what’s become known as the half-penny promised a free Metromover system.

There’s been some concern, Mr. Noriega said, that reinstating a charge to ride would come down to a public vote and that other concessions might have to be built in to clinch support.

But it “needs to be addressed,” he said.

County commissioners in recent years considered reinstating a charge to help balance the transit department’s budget, but the idea never gained traction.

Now, it seems the business community is ready to give it another go.



Photos by Marlene Quaroni

“We never should have put the candy out there” and promised free Metromover rides: Ric Katz.

“We who put forth the People’s Transportation Plan a number of years ago made a mistake. We never should have put the candy out there” and promised a free mover, said Ric Katz, vice chair of the chamber

committee and head of Kommunikatz, a public relations and public affairs firm with a focus on transportation.

Now, he said, knowing not only that a free mover system may have been a backward step but also that the use of the surtax funds has been shifted from new projects to operations and maintenance, “I have no problem going back to the voters” with changes.

The assumption was people would ride a free mover, Mr. Katz said. “Wrong. Let’s change it.”

Hank Klein, vice chairman of Blanca Commercial Real Estate, who said he takes the mover frequently now that his firm has moved into offices at 1450 Brickell, agreed with safety concerns and stressed pressuring county government to address the issue on behalf of downtown residents and workers.

And Carlton Fields shareholder Patricia Thomson, speaking on

behalf of the women of her law firm, said “We would pay for it if it would make it safer.”

Though many at the goal-setting powwow were on board, some took a different view.

Alyce Robertson, executive director of the Downtown Development Authority, offered some perspective: the mover is “an \$8 million-a-year drag on the system... but it would cost \$8 million to reinstate a charge.”

Developer Allen Morris, CEO of Coral Gables-based Allen Morris Co., said reinstating a charge isn’t “really the issue” – it’s security.

Folks would ride, he said, if they knew there would always be a security presence and that the mover cars would be clean.

The trolley system in Coral Gables is safe, clean, heavily used – and free, Mr. Morris noted. “The downtown people mover should be the same thing.”