

MIAMI TODAY

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Vital Downtown Mobility Plan Gets on the Road Decades Late



Our Better Late Than Never Award goes to last week's Transportation Planning Organization vote to revamp the Miami Downtown Transportation Master Plan to meet current and future needs.

That's a very smart move – but decades late.

The last time planners focused on transportation downtown was 20 years ago, meaning that for two decades we've based mobility – and subsequent lack thereof – on life in 2003.

That 2003 plan stretched from I-195 on the north to 26th Road on the south, more than six miles apart. Yet it focused on a very slim strip of bayfront, going west only to I-95.

For those who weren't here 20 years ago – in fast-rising Miami that's most of you – the plan was based on a totally different community and incomprehensibly was never redone to meet a new world.

Take a sketchy tour of what that plan was based on, heading south.

In 2003, just north of 36th Street sat depressed storefronts catering to interior designers, with little traffic. Today it's the trendy and heavily visited Design District.

Just to the south was an eyesore, the long-vacant Buena Vista railroad yards from which the last train had long departed. Today that's giant retail/residential hub Midtown.

Beside the rail yards stood dingy low-rise warehouses, an area of low population and high crime. Today that is world-renown and pricy Wynwood.

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East along the bay were older single-family homes and drug-rehab centers mixed along Biscayne Boulevard with fast-food drive-throughs. Today that's a glitzy high-rise residential canyon, Edgewater.

A bit further, to the west sat vacant land, commercial buildings in decline and the old Miami Arena, which had lost its sports and its life.

Today that is Miami World Center, a rising mix of residential, hotels and retail.

Then came downtown, trying to recover long-past glories. Like the others, downtown rolled up its sidewalks daily when offices emptied and the area was vacant. Nowhere was a shred of nightlife. Today these areas are active 24-hour hubs, with clubs.

Cross the river, on whose bank in 2003 sat the decayed Dupont Plaza Hotel, replaced today by luxury high-rises.

A largely vacant area west of Brickell Avenue in 2003 is now glittering Brickell City Centre. Nearby is smaller Mary Brickell Village. Brickell is almost unrecognizable as skyscrapers dot the area.

Look at downtown's amenities. In 2003, we had American Airlines Arena and lots of hope. Arsht Center construction was late, and we had no bayfront museums.

Now, look at mobility when the last plan was drawn.

The Downtown Development Authority and Brickell Area Association were complaining about traffic congestion, much of it generated by lines of trucks that filled streets and blocked Biscayne Boulevard as they rumbled to the Port of Miami. The planners had not a hint that a future port tunnel would alter the dynamic.

They also didn't consider Brightline rail service downtown, or Tri-Rail that's due to shortly follow.

They had no hint of new technology that would bring Uber and Lyft and a host of future mobility opportunities. Nor could they have foreseen the bicycles and scooters seeking to beat constant road congestion, or the thousands of young downtown residents who walk rather than drive.

They might have counted on the helicopters that flew from Watson Island and the Chalk's seaplanes once based there. Both are long gone.

They had no way of knowing that a massive highway project that is now congesting downtown and promising double-decked expressways and a signature bridge would soon bring vast mobility changes.

They couldn't have dreamed of urban air taxis that were then Buck Rogers science fiction but now are in development.

Of course, they had no overarching Smart Plan that is bent on bringing rapid transit to six sectors of Miami-Dade, though they did know that the county was moving on the then two-decade-old plan for

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light rail to Miami Beach from downtown. In 2003, the county shifted gears and sought instead of light rail to run downtown's Metromover to Miami Beach. Now, in 2023, Mayor Daniella Levine Cava has decided once again to run downtown's Metromover to Miami Beach – some things never change.

They also couldn't count in 2003 on the Miami Intermodal Center west of downtown, which didn't yet exist, or the county's current plan for a multi-modal transit hub in Government Center that was planned independently before the transportation planners did any planning.

So, it's pretty late to be planning mobility for the new vibrant downtown that sprang up before its transportation was planned in a systematic way.

So present the Better Late Than Never Award now – and then get moving on that new plan before we develop anything more without the vital transportation to serve it.