

HOMEPAGE

## 'It's a little messy.' Work on a new I-395 span is totally changing downtown Miami.

BY ANDRES VIGLUCCI



The former parking lot at the front door to the Arsht Center's opera and ballet house has been turned into a big, busy construction yard. To the west — from the Arsht to I-95 — broad swaths of land have been cleared of warehouses, commercial buildings and apartments to make way for a [brand-new incarnation of Interstate 395](#), the obsolete, hazardous piece of highway leading to and from the MacArthur Causeway and South Beach.

Across the Miami River, in the parking lot of the Miami-Dade justice complex at Northwest

12th Street, giant concrete pillars etched with tropical flora sprout up through a gap where the center section of the elevated State Road 836 has been surgically removed. They look like monoliths left behind by an ancient civilization, but they're actually the very modern support columns for a second deck that will carry traffic over the existing highway and hurtling across I-95.

And across [resurgent Overtown](#), ravaged by the construction of the original I-395 some 60 years ago, the unfinished decks of the new overpass hang over streets and apartments as cranes and crews working 'round the clock lengthen them by the day — higher, more sculptural and airier than the old, but still formidable masses of gray concrete.

Even as the pandemic kept many office workers and visitors away, the stretch of downtown Miami and Overtown long defined and defiled by I-395's dark, oppressive highway bridges and embankments has been undergoing a dramatic transformation. Those who haven't been downtown lately may have a hard time recognizing the area. Some landmarks are gone, construction crews and heavy equipment and material are everywhere, and unfamiliar, unfinished new structures rise into the sky.

The complete reconstruction of the old I-395 and the double-decking of the SR 836 approach from the Marlins Stadium and Jackson Memorial Hospital complex may be one of the most complex and consequential highway projects in the city of Miami in a generation.

The Florida Department of Transportation says the \$818 million project, which also includes a resurfacing and some improvements to a portion of I-95, will ease the bottlenecks and end the lane-weaving that have long plagued the spaghetti bowl of highway intersections, traversed daily by 450,000 motor vehicles.

But it won't be done anytime soon. Completion won't come before Fall of 2024, leaving another 30 months of traffic bedlam.

FDOT engineers and contractors contend the new highway will be not only safer and more efficient, but even beautiful: They say a new "signature bridge" dramatically supported by six soaring arches over Biscayne Boulevard will become a new icon signaling downtown Miami's rebirth. Land under the I-395 deck, more than 30 acres in total, will become one of the city's largest expanses of parks, trails and public spaces, complementing the [Underline being installed](#) south of the Miami River and [the promised Ludlam Trail](#) along the path of an unused rail line from Downtown Dadeland to near Miami International Airport.

Dubbed The Underdeck for now, the ground-level work would transform what's now a blighted, disconnected no-man's land of low overpasses and closely spaced columns beneath I-395 into a series of sun-splashed parks, gardens and public spaces. They would be linked by a mile-long pathway between Overtown and Biscayne Bay, helping weave back together what the old highway severed. All of that would be made possible by raising the new expressway farther off the ground and drastically reducing the number of support piers and earthen "plugs".

The old I-395 will be gradually demolished as the new span is built, and eventually all traces of it will disappear, FDOT said.

"Nothing that is there now will remain," said Oscar Gonzalez III, FDOT's senior community outreach specialist for the reconstruction project. "Right now, it's an unusable, dark space. But that will provide an unprecedented opportunity to take 30 acres and turn them into community spaces."

A segmental bridge is being installed during the I-395 construction project taking place near downtown Miami and Overtown on Tuesday, June 8, 2021. MATIAS J. OCNER  
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For those who have ventured downtown, the project has meant learning new routes amid near-daily lane shifts and street closings, mostly at night. Some changes are permanent. For instance, you can no longer turn right while going southbound on Northeast Second Avenue to take the ramp up to westbound I-395. Instead, you now have to take Northeast First Avenue.

Other big navigational changes are coming, and soon. Come July, drivers will no longer access the MacArthur Causeway to Miami Beach from behind the Arsht's Knight Concert Hall. Instead, they will need to take Biscayne Boulevard south and make a new left turn to reach the causeway.

Eastbound I-395 motorists heading from the MacArthur to I-95 northbound will also notice a change around mid-July. The curving ramp to I-95, ramp, now located to the right, will be taken down and replaced with a temporary alternative to the left. That will likely last about 16 months before the route shifts again.

Most significantly, though, is the fact that a project decades in planning and long wrapped in controversy is now well under way. And, years of disruptions aside, a critical stretch of Miami will eventually look and function very differently.

"I think it will eventually be a good addition to the city," said Raul Guerrero, spokesman for the Downtown Neighbors Alliance, an influential association of local residents. "I'm surprised how fast they have worked."

Still, "You have to be honest and say it's a little messy. It's a construction site," he said. "I think that it helped that for a year we were at home. Now that people are going back to work, there are some problems. Traffic is worse....They keep on changing the ways to get around."

Traffic flows down I-95 as a construction project continues on the highway near downtown Miami and Overtown on Tuesday, June 8, 2021. MATIAS J. OCNER [MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM](mailto:MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM)

## CONTROVERSIAL CHANGE

Not everyone wanted the new highway. Some argued I-395 should have simply been demolished and not replaced, or put into a surface boulevard, or a tunnel or open cut below street level — options Miami Mayor Manny Diaz fruitlessly sought during his term in office. Some critics regard the project, funded by FDOT and the former Miami-Dade Expressway Authority, as a colossal waste of money that would have been better spent on expanding public transit.

But the critics' objections helped reshape and improve what otherwise might have been a bare-bones highway reconstruction, turning a stretch of ugly, basic infrastructure into something more appealing to the eye and the pedestrian at street level.

When it became clear FDOT would not change course, city and Miami-Dade County civic leaders and officials demanded at the very least an aesthetically pleasing bridge to replace the old, low and gloomy overpass at the juncture with a thriving cultural and residential district along Biscayne Boulevard. Some city officials even successfully sued FDOT to ensure that aesthetics would not take a back seat to engineering in the design and bidding out of the project.

[A bidding battle](#) and political tussle between the two top bidders to design and build the project hinged in significant measure on which team would deliver the most aesthetically pleasing alternative. The fight ended only when the second-place bidder, a consortium including MCM and Figg Bridge Engineers, withdrew after another collaboration, a pedestrian bridge at Florida International University, [collapsed while under construction](#) in 2018 with tragic consequences.

At the Downtown Development Authority, a semi-autonomous city agency, director Christina Crespi said the explosion in downtown population, cultural venues and continuing demand for office space made easing of frequent, massive backups a pivotal need.

“The expansion and reconfiguration of I-395 will improve access to and from Downtown Miami, which is one of the fastest-growing neighborhoods in the country – home to 115,000 residents, 250,000 daytime visitors, and nearly six million tourists annually,” Crespi said in an email. “With more people and businesses moving and expanding to Miami each day, infrastructure projects like these are critical to maintaining quality of life and managing traffic flow, especially when our major cultural and entertainment venues are operating events at the same time.”

## TRANSFORMATIVE SPACE

Only one key element remains unsettled: What exactly will The Underdeck consist of?

Each of the finalists in the bidding included an elaborate series of gardens, parks, exhibits, trails and public spaces in their proposals, but those were all conceptual. Under an agreement with FDOT, the city of Miami is now working on a “consensus” plan that will be feasible to build and operate and improves on the concepts developed by the winning bidder, said assistant planning director Jeremy Calleros Gauger. The city hired noted landscape architecture firm [Hargreaves Jones](#), designers of Miami Beach’s uber-popular South Pointe Park, to help develop its plan for The Underdeck. One goal, a city presentation notes, is to incorporate “more planting, less paving.”

“We told FDOT, you have a design. We have concerns about making that design work long term, and whether this has had proper community input,” Calleros Gauger said.

Under the agreement, the city would be responsible for managing and maintaining the resulting public spaces. In April, the city held an in-person community meeting outdoors in Overtown, attended by 50 to 60 people, and followed up with an online meeting to gather input. The city had also sponsored a week-long public planning session in Overtown in 2017 to outline community preferences.

Next week, the city will meet virtually with the Downtown Neighbors Alliance to discuss the plan. Some residents in Park West, the rapidly redeveloping neighborhood south of I-395 between the Boulevard and Overtown, are concerned about the city’s ability to maintain the park spaces, Guerrero said.

“They have mixed feelings. Some people see the potential for a beautiful place,” he said. “Others worry whether it will be managed properly.”

As construction progresses, focusing on ensuring The Underdeck becomes a “transformative public space” should be a city and community priority, the DDA’s Crespi said. The city has not yet earmarked funding for its management and maintenance, but the DDA has pledged \$50,000 towards the planning effort.

One salient feature will be a “Heritage Trail” feature that highlights Overtown history and connects across the Florida East Coast Railway – long the dividing line between the historically Black neighborhood and downtown Miami and Biscayne Boulevard to the east. The city and its consultants are working on redesigning a planned pedestrian and cycling bridge over the tracks after persuading FDOT to remove earthen supporting embankments that acted as barriers, Calleros Gauger said.

“The end goal is to have a beautiful public amenity that’s a world-class public space, that’s green and inviting and used for many different purposes,” said Suzanne Hollander, director of the city’s Department of Real Estate Asset management.

## NEIGHBORHOOD CONCERN

On Thursday, the city commission delayed a vote to extend a deadline for a final Underdeck plan to February 2022 because Jeffrey Watson, whose district includes Overtown, said he has questions about who would pay for it.

But many Overtown residents and advocates gaze skeptically on the columns and unfinished highway decks overhead, some just a few yards from apartments and businesses. They say it’s far from clear whether the new version will be a real improvement, and whether city and FDOT officials are truly taking neighborhood views seriously in designing The Underdeck.

Aerial view of the I-395 construction project taking place near downtown Miami and Overtown on Tuesday, June 8, 2021. MATIAS J. OCNER [MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM](mailto:MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM)

Cornelius “Neil” Shiver, director of the city’s Community Redevelopment Agency, says residents have pressed for The Underdeck to include economic opportunities for locals such as a farmer’s market or vending booths and create activities ‘Townners can enjoy. Calleros Gauger said the plan will incorporate those kinds of features.

Shiver and some locals are skeptical.

“I don’t know if they’re really listening or just going through the protocols,” Shiver said. “The community wants small business opportunities, a farmer’s market type opportunity. They can say they’re listening. But whether the information is really going back, I’m doubtful.

“The fear is, we will end up with a concrete monster under a concrete monster.”

One lifelong Overtown resident, Debbie Roberts, 59, dismisses the supposed benefits of the new highway out of hand.

“It’s just the same thing that tore down Overtown before,” she said.

## KEEPING THE FLOW

FDOT and the winning bidders, a joint venture of giant contractor Archer Western and locals The de Moya Group, adopted an ambitious strategy for the project to keep traffic flowing even as they build. To that end, the state began seizing and buying private property along the planned route along both sides of the old expressway more than a decade ago.

The contractors are building a second, viaduct-style deck over SR 836 that will allow motorists going between the Beach and portions west of Jackson to fly over I-95. The critical ramp between eastbound 836 and I-95, which backs up dangerously at evening rush hour, will at the same time be doubled to two lanes.

Rendering of the planned double-decking of a section of State Road 836, part of the five-year, \$802 million "Connecting Miami" reconstruction project. CONNECTING MIAMI

The new I-395 will be quite a different highway from the existing span. The new I-395 bridges will be elevated between 20 to 25 feet and as high as 60 feet where it meets SR 836 in Overtown, compared to overpasses now as low as 14 feet, FDOT said. Overhead, the expressway will be split into two separate, elevated spans, one going east and the other west. Support columns would be reduced from the 440 now existing to no more than 107.

That means significantly more light and air will penetrate to the ground, and will give the planned Underdeck a far more open feel, FDOT says.

The project will also reduce or eliminate the large embankments of earth and concrete, or plugs, that blocked streets and gave a forbidding look to surrounding blocks. That will allow the reopening of Northwest Second Avenue in Overtown, closed for decades by the highway's construction.

FDOT has also been working to minimize disruptions from construction for the Arsht Center for the Performing Arts and, on the other side of the expressway, the Frost Science and Perez Art museums, which are gradually returning to normal operations after the COVID-19 pandemic forced their closure and then limited hours and capacity.

Construction employees work to install a new manhole at the core of the I-395, SR-836 and I-95 construction project taking place near downtown Miami and Overtown on Tuesday, June 8, 2021.

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The Arsht, which is ramping up to a full season this fall, lost use of a state-owned lot in front of its Ziff Ballet and Opera House that served as public parking. But administrators say there is plenty of parking in the area, including at the nearby 1400 garage, where patrons can pre-pay when buying show tickets, and at the Omni and Melody tower garages as well as surrounding surface lots.

The center is also sending every ticket buyer emails with updates on route changes, street closings and parking options. Those are also updated regularly on the [Arsht website](#). President and CEO Johann Zietsman also advises people driving to the Arsht on I-95 to get off one exit earlier than I-395 and take surface streets to the center to avoid backups.

Zietsman said FDOT consults routinely with Arsht administrators on everything from the impact of traffic shifts and the timing of especially loud or disruptive work to avoid times when patrons may be leaving a performance (outside noise doesn't penetrate the sound-isolated performance halls). Night work is the heaviest and typically starts at 10 p.m., but if a performance is letting out later FDOT has been willing to hold off until 11 p.m., he said.

"We have very good and open and regular communication with them," Zietsman said. "Every time we express a specific concern they really do respond proactively. We understand they've got a job to do, and it's a big one. It does mean for the next four or five years communication with patrons is very important. We're looking forward for this to end, but this is how it will be for now."

## BENEFITS

The project has brought some improvements, Zietsman noted. New, brighter lighting is already being installed on surrounding blocks that have been poorly lit in the past.

The lot converted into a construction yard will be the site of the new expressway's splashiest feature – the six-arched signature bridge, a massive undertaking on its own.

A huge and deep hole for its central footing, where all six arches meet, has already been dug and lined with 1.7 million pounds of rebar. A massive concrete pour, involving some 500 truckloads, will soon fill it, FDOT's Gonzalez said.

When the bridge is done, the six precast concrete arches, each with a different height, will sprout like a fountain – some critics have unfavorably likened it to a giant spider – and support spans suspended over the boulevard for 936 feet. The tallest arch will reach 330 feet. Clearance over the boulevard will average out to 27 feet, or the equivalent of a two-story building.

Crews are already lifting sections of beveled roadway decks, made at a remote casting yard and weighing 50 to 90 tons, into place over the streets of Overtown. Trucked to the site, they are hoisted into place with cranes. Over the Florida East Coast Railway line that carries Brightline's trains, they are using powerful "segment lifters" that crawl along the new unfinished spans to carefully place a new section at its end, adding to their length section by section.

The expressway's westbound span will be finished first, on the north side of the existing roadway, Gonzalez said. Foundation and support work has also begun on eastbound spans, he said.

FDOT acknowledges the constant changes may be bewildering to motorists, but contend it will be worth it in the end. In the meantime, they have sought to minimize the pain. The agency also issues constant updates through the project website, emails and social media.

“In terms of what drivers should expect. It is a day and night operation. Some of this work will require closures on interstates and local roads,” he said. “But that happens at night.”