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Building Kendall a toll expressway: Traffic relief or 'Band-aid over a gaping wound?'

By Douglas Hanks
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Traffic is bad in West Kendall. Will extending the Dolphin Expressway, pictured here near Northwest 57th Avenue, be the answer? MIAMI HERALD FILE

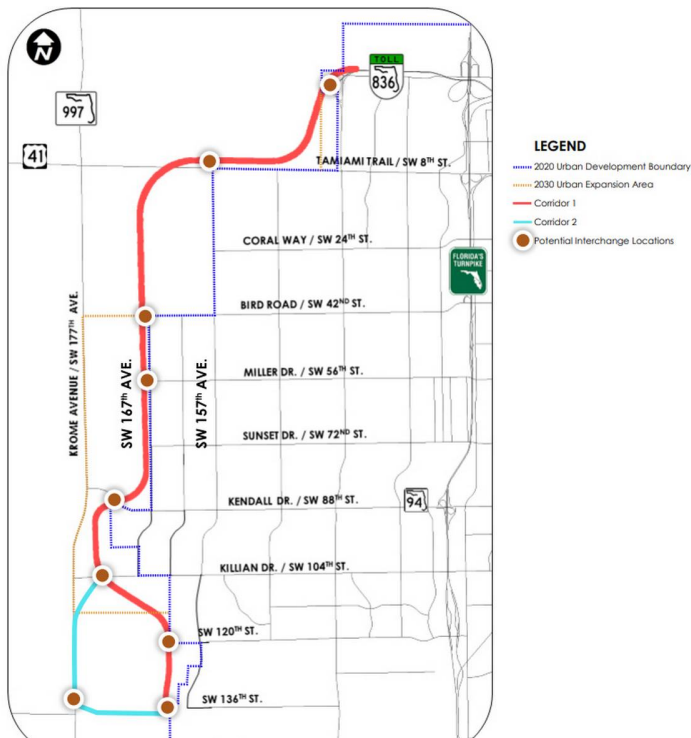
One Kendall resident after another rose from their seats at the high school auditorium to tell Miami-Dade's mayor they support a new toll highway running for 14 miles alongside their community — anything to free them from the clogged neighborhood streets that slow their commutes east to Miami.

Then Michelle Garcia took her turn at a microphone in the town hall and told Mayor Carlos Gimenez his proposed six-lane "Kendall Parkway" would only make gridlock worse.

"We're putting a Band-aid over a gaping wound. We have a traffic problem because instead of spending money on trains, we keep building roads," said Garcia, an IT executive and Democratic candidate for the Florida House. "Roads don't decrease cars. Roads add cars."

Gimenez wasn't buying it. "That is one of the dumbest things I've ever heard," he said. "Roads add cars? As you make a road, they start popping up?"

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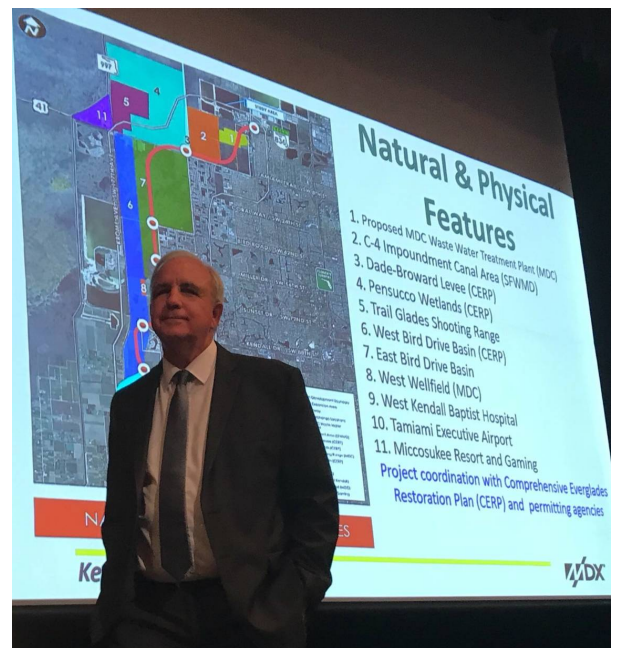
The exchange captured the larger debate under way as Miami-Dade commissioners consider an historic expansion of the county's system of major highways and toll roads. [Gimenez is the top champion](#) of extending Miami-Dade's busiest toll expressway, State Road 836, best known as the Dolphin Expressway. He wants to expand tolling on the 836 to build another 15 miles of highway to the southwest, largely through farmland bordering West Kendall and past the county's zoning boundary for urban development.

Funded through new toll revenues and built by the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority, the route would nearly double the length of the 836. It would give Kendall residents the option of driving a bit west to catch a northern highway that connects to the Dolphin, rather than relying on the Florida Turnpike to head north. With a closer expressway to the west, advocates say West Kendall's neighborhood streets would see some relief as thousands of motorists head for the new parkway.

Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez while presiding over a town hall in West Kendall about a transportation plan he endorses: extending the Dolphin Expressway southwest into West Kendall.

In Kendall "a lot of people are spending an hour and a half each way for wherever they want to go," said Albert Sosa, an MDX consultant. He said about 70 percent of Kendall residents work outside the area. "There are a lot of commuters in Kendall, without a lot of options outside of the Turnpike."

County commissioners have [twice foiled Gimenez's efforts](#) to win backing for the proposal, [citing concerns](#) about having to relax protections of the Urban Development Boundary — often called the UDB — to allow construction of the major new western highway. Gimenez took a different legislative route, and now the 13 commissioners face a preliminary vote Wednesday on whether to kill the extension requested by the expressway authority that's best known as the MDX.



Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez while presiding over a town hall in West Kendall about a transportation plan he endorses: extending the Dolphin Expressway southwest into West Kendall.

A No vote would stop [the proposal](#) in its tracks, while a Yes vote would forward to state regulators a draft proposal to change the county's comprehensive plan to allow the 836 to [stretch past the](#) Urban Development Boundary.

A final vote would probably come later in the year, after Florida sent back its recommendations and critique.

To pressure commissioners, the MDX is funding campaign-style mailers to residents who live near the proposed expressway and urging them to attend Wednesday's 9:30 a.m. meeting at the Stephen Clark center in downtown Miami. "Show Your Support!!" reads the flyer from the toll-funded agency. "Let the County Commission know that we need a traffic solution NOW! WE WANT THE KENDALL PARKWAY!"

The mailer's message meshed with Gimenez's dismissal of Garcia's comments about an expanded expressway boosting car trips, rather than just redirecting them. But research touted by urban planners does knock highway expansion as a temporary fix that often simply encourages more people to drive until congestion returns.



NATURAL and PHYSICAL FEATU

"If people are looking to build highways to solve traffic-congestion problems, many times they're disappointed in the long run," said Sam Schwartz, a New York-based traffic consultant. He said new highways tend to "induce demand" — prompting people who otherwise wouldn't drive that route to take advantage of the new option and join traffic.

"It's really not a choice of having congestion," said Victor Dover, an urban planner in Miami and critic of the 836 extension. "It's a choice of how many lanes on a highway do you want for that congestion?"

Myriam Marquez, Gimenez's spokeswoman, said the mayor was arguing that only new development spurred by an extended 836 would increase the number of cars owned by people in the area. "We wouldn't be attracting new cars," she said. "We would be moving cars from part of [the area] to the new road."

Along with traffic theory, the pending vote on the 836 extension presents a battle on multiple fronts over the long-running push for a southwest expressway.

Environmentalists see the proposed \$600 million extension, which would extend over wetlands and well fields, as a significant threat to the county's besieged supply of underground drinking water. They're labeling the road the "Everglades Snakeway" and arguing it runs directly counter to longstanding efforts to reduce sprawl and encourage denser building in the urban core.

"These areas have been protected so we can mitigate against flooding and protect our drinking water," said Laura Reynolds, a consultant with Friends of the Everglades. "Putting a roadway down the center of that only induces sprawl into an area that should be protected into perpetuity."

On Friday, Miami's Downtown Development Authority granted preliminary approval to a resolution opposing the proposed 836 extension, according to two board members.

The expressway fight also overlaps with Miami-Dade's debate over transit funding, with some elected officials wanting to siphon off at least part of MDX's nearly [\\$240 million in yearly toll revenues](#) into the county's under-funded budget for expanding Metrorail.

"MDX's excess revenues are on the backs of the working and middle class of this county," said Commissioner Xavier Suarez. "That excess money should be used for mass transit — not for more highways."

The largely stalled pursuit of Miami-Dade's 2016 SMART blueprint to expand Metrorail has Gimenez pointing to the 836 extension as his top priority during his final two years in office. He [won a seat on the MDX board last year](#), and now is the toll authority's primary advocate spokesman for doubling the length of the 836 into West Kendall.

"I'm a father. And I'm a grandfather. I want to protect this area for future generations and protect our water supplies," he told the town hall audience of roughly 400 people. Gimenez pointed to upgrades planned for the expressway, including dedicated lanes for express buses and bikes and nature trails on either side of it. And while extending mass transit into the area would cost billions of tax dollars, MDX's toll collections would limit the cost of the expressway to drivers willing to use it.

"It's clear the parkway offers the best solution for the money," he said.

At the April 18 town hall meeting inside the John Ferguson High auditorium, residents largely endorsed the idea of extending the 836 into their community. The school sits about 10 blocks from the proposed expressway route, which would run just west of Southwest 167th Avenue for much of its route.

Sharing stories of grueling commutes from the depths of suburban Miami, the Kendall residents argued it's not fair to rob their community of the kind of expressway that speeds highway travel elsewhere in the county.

"I care about the environment, too," resident Tom Boswell told Gimenez. "But when I have to choose between the welfare of my neighbors and the welfare of the yellow-bellied wombat bird, I choose my neighbors."

Approving the expressway would not allow developers to build past the Urban Development Boundary. That requires a two-thirds vote by the County Commission to adjust the boundary and allow denser development closer to the Everglades. But MDX's own materials says the agency expects an expanded 836 to eventually stretch the western limits of urban development in Miami-Dade.

A 2010 MDX presentation said the proposed highway "could be used as ultimate urban boundary to limit western expansion." A [2016 study of the potential route configurations](#) described the selected choice as having a "high to moderate potential to induce development."

Gimenez noted that any developer wanting to build a larger project by a new Kendall Expressway would still need the same backing from the County Commission that's needed without the new highway. "This is not an effort to move the UDB," said Gimenez, a former county commissioner who has touted his support for the current urban boundaries in his campaigns.

The strongest criticism Gimenez faced at the town hall was from residents complaining the proposed highway was too close to their homes. Several speakers said they endorsed the new expressway but wanted it even farther west — an option being pushed by the county commissioner for West Kendall, Joe Martinez.

"This is pretty much in our backyard," said Lisa Enfinger, who pointed out the corner of her house was visible in one part of a promotional video MDX showed of the proposed highway.

"There is no question something has to be done," she said. "But my hope is the path of the project could be moved."

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