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## Mayor's about-face on transit modes is compelling logic

Written by [Michael Lewis](#) on July 25, 2017

Not everyone can gaze at new facts, realize he's been chugging hard down the wrong track, admit it, and then start chugging hard in reverse.

That's what Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Giménez has done in the past two weeks, jettisoning a dream of adding six rail corridors and saying that, for now, his new aim will be special buses for most of those corridors that we can get rolling far sooner, all in about three years instead of decades for rail.

The mayor was engineering rail for all six routes. We agreed, so we empathize. The mayor pushed for the Rolls Royce of transit but it now seems the best we can afford is a dependable American car. Disappointing, but not bad.

The mayor now says we can't pay for rail so let's get the best we can fund, special fast-track buses, and at the same time put transit corridors in county hands, available for coming technology.

Bus rapid transit is estimated to cost \$534 million, money we don't yet have but that the mayor says we can cobble together in a 50-50 deal with the state, and do it far faster than we could get rail even if we could afford it.

There was never a funding plan for six rail lines, but cost



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estimates range from \$3.6 billion



to \$6 billion, both  
reliant on federal  
funds or a private  
investor, neither  
of which is real  
today. Few  
investors want to  
lose money year  
after year as  
transit does.

Mayor Giménez was wedded to rail everywhere until numbers-crunchers pored over how much is really available and what it could buy.

So on July 14 he wrote to the 13 commissioners that the dream of rail is for now just that – a dream. But he did offer a hope: “If we follow a non-traditional process for developing revenue options and utilize support from our partners, we may be able to initiate service on all six corridors.”

Service, yes, Rail service, mostly not.

The mayor says we can have bus rapid transit in several years by buying buses, getting dedicated lanes, and adding overpasses across busy roads.

Part of his plan is to let the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority develop and operate an initial east-west phase along SR 836 and use tracks owned by the Brightline rail service that is soon to start to link downtown Miami to Aventura.

That leaves just four corridors, and the mayor has hopped off the train to say bus rapid transit will at least cut commute time and pave the way for emerging technologies like autonomous vehicles.

One advantage of the mayor's change, if adopted – he's not in the driver's seat – is that we wouldn't invest billions in infrastructure that technology may soon outpace by increasing the capacity of roadways and speeding travel. That technology will rely on automated systems that might space self-driving cars just inches instead of car-lengths apart.

Is that technology so far in the future that rail – if we could find money for it – would still be a valid investment in five or six decades, or is it three decades, or two, or one? If rail will be obsolete in ten years and it takes five years to build and start running, we

would get five years of full value from, say, \$6 billion invested, or \$1.2 billion cost per year, versus \$534 million total for bus rapid transit.

Most such questions are economic: what must we give up to get the service, how effective will it be, can we get the money in the first place, and then how much will operating costs be annually and do we also have that money?

The mayor's memo is bare bones. We are now spending \$50 million to study the six corridors and cost out varying modes of transit in each. Those studies will flesh out the picture he paints.

Meanwhile, we're seeing county commission push-back. Everyone was promised a Rolls Royce and nobody wants just a standard American car – even though we'd struggle just to make payments on a Ford or Chevy, let alone to keep the tank filled and the car in good repair.

Commission Chairman Esteban Bovo Jr. wants us to scrape together all we can and get one Rolls in one corridor instead of the six Fords – in other words, one rail line and possibly nothing else for now. We understand his frustration and his desire for rail – we share the desire.

But we are swayed by the logic of Mayor Giménez, who also wanted rail everywhere. He looked at the numbers and found them lacking. No Rolls for us.

Besides, we can't even afford to operate fully the latest rail we built, the short leg to Miami International Airport. We're cutting back all the transit service we have for lack of operating funds. Where is the magic operating cash source for new rail?

It's true that county bus use has been in freefall. In May, riders fell 7.3% below the prior May. But it's also true that county buses that go farther, run faster and make fewer stops – like bus rapid transit – do far better.

We applaud Mayor Giménez for squarely facing facts that show what we need and can afford today is bus rapid transit simply because it's do-able and rail isn't.

Note that he calls bus rapid transit “an initial phase.” Unlike tracks and rail cars, bus rapid transit doesn't lock in our future with an aging technology, but it will give us corridors for whatever the future brings.

Those corridors could hold future rail, but new technology is coming down the line at us, and the newly acquired corridors would find us ready and waiting for that too.

The mayor's argument is compelling. But the decision isn't his. It's going to be a wild ride.