

City takes added look at trolley system details, weighs fare plan

BY ZACHARY S. FAGENSON

In putting together a rubber-tire trolley system in Miami, city officials are taking another look at the routes' details before asking commissioners to okay the operator's proposal.

But it's not quite clear when the trolleys, similar to those in Coral Gables and Doral, will hit downtown Miami streets.

"As far as implementation goes, what I can tell you is that what we've done is taken a little step back and are having our transit consultants take an evaluation of the ridership estimates for each of the loops," said Jose Gonzalez, city assistant transportation director. "They're doing a very minor modeling exercise so we can get an idea of what the ridership on each loop will be."

And the city is "trying to make all four loops sustainable so that once we put this trolley service into operation it will never have to be terminated for lack of funding," he added.

Sustainability could come via a fare as high as \$1 or assessing merchants near trolley routes through a business improvement district.

However funding for the system shakes out, the date trolleys will actually hit the road is a moving target.

When the city late last year requested proposals for a turnkey operator of trolleys and complementing services, city Chief Procurement Officer Glenn Marcos said he expected commissioners to pick an operator by April or May. Mr. Gonzalez in an April interview said he expected a signed contract between the city and the operator, Limousines of South Florida, by this month.

By last week capital improvements Director Alice Bravo said she expected an operating agreement later this summer or early fall.

Mr. Gonzalez said the latest system analysis started late last week and should wrap in mid-July.

"There have been requests for minor modifications to the loops as they were," he added. "We'd like to have the report completed and have the opportunity to brief all the commissioners before taking the contract with the vendor before city commission for approval."

And a key contributor to the system's layout, which includes a Health District loop and others connecting Brickell

Avenue and Biscayne Boulevard, Coral Way and Brickell Avenue, Overtown and the Health District, and Allapattah and the Health District, has been the Downtown Development Authority, which helped fund a study of proposed routes in early stages of planning.

The authority's "board approved a resolution in where we supported the trolley as a concept, expressed our preferred route and also got into some operational preferences," said Javier Betancourt, authority manager of urban planning and transportation.

The resolution said the authority would support the Brickell-Biscayne trolley if it were to run seven days a week at 15-minute intervals, run east and west through the central business district and charge no more than \$1, with route reassessment after the first six months.

The authority also agreed to provide "branding, marketing support and trolley stop signage."

But it was also wary of making too many demands and was instead confident that the rubber-tire buses would provide the flexibility downtown demands.

"I think one of the dangers in promot-

ing these types of services is... trying to serve too many masters, and when you try to do that with transit you ultimately serve none," Mr. Betancourt said. "Unfortunately, we have so much need in downtown."

Yet when that need will be filled, even with commission approval of the sole operator's proposal, is unclear.

"Even they are having a hard time coming up with the vehicles. Everything's on backorders," Mr. Betancourt said of the operator that is to provide the trolleys initially. "That's what we've been told."

The city last week approved use of \$4 million, passed down from President Obama's stimulus package, to buy its own trolleys through the county's transit department. But from the time the buses are ordered to delivery could be 12 to 18 months.

"There are several cities that want to purchase trolley buses and the thought there was that we can take advantage of economies of scale," Mr. Gonzalez of the city said. "We are having those discussions with the county, and the county is having those discussions with various cities."