

Here's one idea to relieve downtown traffic: Dig a tunnel under the Miami River

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The Miami River is one of the city's great unsung assets. But traversing the waterway gets more problematic by the year as downtown continues to grow at a vertigo-inducing pace.

Aside from filling in the river, the only option at the [Brickell Avenue chokepoint](#) is to go over it. Unless cars could drive under it — an idea that has been discussed since Maurice Ferré was mayor some 40 years ago.

A Miami River tunnel plan is [gaining traction again](#). Mayor Francis Suarez is in favor of it. They built one to the Port of Miami, didn't they? Downtown commuters, business people and residents welcome anything that could relieve chronic [gridlock](#) on saturated streets and bypass the hated [Brickell drawbridge](#) that halts traffic flow whenever it opens for boats. River commerce would be better served by fewer restrictions on vessel movement.

Six tunnel concepts developed by the Miami-Dade Transportation Planning Organization were recently examined at a Downtown Development Authority meeting. The group was opposed to designs that would cause dramatic trenching for huge entrance and exit ramps on Brickell Avenue, but supported tunnel alternatives that would maintain "pedestrian connections along key downtown corridors."

The DDA doesn't want to sacrifice walkability in Miami's [increasingly dense downtown](#).

"Our goal is to encourage use of public transit as well as foot and bicycle traffic," Miami Commissioner and DDA Chairman Ken Russell said. "A tunnel through the heart of Brickell would discourage pedestrians."

Development in the immediate area around the bridge is dizzying: Multiple new towers are planned at the sites of the James L. Knight Center, the Courtyard by Marriott hotel and the Capital Grille building.

“You could end up simply moving the traffic jam from the bridge to the entrance and exit of the tunnel,” said DDA board member Richard Lydecker, whose office is nearby.

In its [feasibility study](#), the county recommended the option of two stacked bored tunnels with two upper northbound lanes and two lower southbound lanes to compensate for cramped space. Its north portals would be on Biscayne Boulevard, in the vicinity of Northeast Fourth and Second streets, where it would slope down beneath the foundation of the Metromover tracks, make its way southward, take a right turn at the river to continue under the bridge and avoid the Miami Circle, and emerge on Brickell Avenue with its south portals near Southeast 10th and 12th streets. The length of the tunnel, including portals, would be 2.1 miles, about the same as the PortMiami tunnel.

“When we evaluated the pros and cons, that concept was the most feasible,” said Jesus Guerra, deputy director of the transportation planning organization. “It provides a connection between Biscayne Boulevard and Brickell, avoids digging large ramps in the center of downtown, does not affect ships and cargo on the river and allows for placement of the boring machine.”

The cost would be \$900 million and construction would take 4 to 4 1/2 years. The [county’s results](#) were presented to the Florida Department of Transportation, which will conduct its own Traffic Analysis and Constructability Study.

Alan Ojeda, DDA board member and CEO of Rilea Development, also favors a tunnel but not one on Brickell.

“Brickell is a pedestrian neighborhood, our best brand and cannot be destroyed by trenching tunnels,” Ojeda said, adding that one of the DDA’s ideas is for separate northbound and southbound tunnels, with one under the river at Miami Avenue, which could be built in phases.

Tunnel talk could go on for another 40 years. In the meantime, there are other proposals for alleviating what Russell calls the “hornet’s nest” of traffic on downtown’s awkwardly designed grid.

Neisen Kasdin, DDA vice chair, advocates extending Metromover.

“If there are significant dollars to be spent on mobility improvements, I think it’s far more important to spend on public transit than on a tunnel,” he said. “Our offices are in Brickell City Centre and when I have to go to the other side of town I use Metromover. We need to get people out of their cars and not build things that make them more car-dependent.”

The Miami River Commission has developed a list of 12 recommendations to improve traffic flow and reduce congestion. One that could cut bridge delays in half asks for the posting of a police officer or public service aide on the bridge to prevent pedestrians from sneaking under the lowered safety gates and delaying the bridge opening sequence as they walk across. The bridge tenders then admonish violators over the loud speakers — and the pedestrian problem happens so often that hotel guests across the street have complained about the volume and frequency of the loudspeaker admonishments.

The commission suggests restoring the third northbound lane on the bridge — FDOT reduced it to two — and to not allow hotels on the north side of the bridge to block traffic lanes for valet parking.

Among the other suggestions:

Traffic light synchronization would help flush the backup of cars. Smart signage would warn drivers when the bridge is going up and direct them to alternate routes before they get stuck in bridge bottlenecks. A “What Up Bridge” app would send text and email notifications. And better signage for marine and landside traffic would explain passage and opening times.