



## Miami's New \$375 Million Train of Thought

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Back in the late 1890s, when Henry Flagler extended tracks of the Florida East Coast Railway through the hinterlands of Florida down to Miami, mosquitos and water moccasins were likely more prevalent than people.

Flagler's vision helped create one of the world's great cities. Flash forward to today, and rail may be on the verge of helping Miami take the next big leap forward.

Miami-Dade County Mayor Carlos Gimenez is betting that a \$375 million venture with a Japanese-Italian rail company, unveiled last month, can help Miami become a model for moving people from cars to mass transit.

In March, Hitachi Rail USA, the American subsidiary of Hitachi Rail Italy, announced the completion of a manufacturing facility for the county's Department of Transportation and Public Works' new Metrorail vehicles. Consisting of more than 140,000 square feet, the plant, located in Medley, will manufacture 136 cars and 272 motor bogies (the structural subassembly accommodating wheels, axles, motor and gear box) needed to replace the existing Metrorail fleet. The pre-assembled parts will originate from an Italian plant acquired by Hitachi Rail last year.

Contracted by the city Transportation and Public Works departments, the first new Metrorail vehicles are scheduled to be placed into service late next year, with production work lasting until at least early 2019.



The new cars will feature Wi-Fi, LED lighting and other bells and whistles attractive to millennials and, well, anyone tired of sitting in endless traffic. Will it be enough to spark a behavioral change that transforms South Florida?

There is significant promise for the 25-mile, dual-track, elevated rapid transit Metrorail and its current 75,000 daily riders. Metrorail provides service to Miami International Airport and runs from Kendall through South Miami, Coral Gables and downtown Miami; to the Civic Center/Jackson Memorial Hospital area; and to

Brownsville, Liberty City, Hialeah and Medley in northwest Miami-Dade, with connections to Broward and Palm Beach counties at the Tri-Rail/Metrorail transfer station.

Miami-Dade, utilizing its half-penny transit tax, is updating the 32-year-old fleet with the amenities that will provide an entirely better/different experience. That's the key to the plan: create a model of mass transit resembling what's found in Europe and Asia, one based on quietness, efficiency and high passenger counts. With the opening of its first facility in the United States, Hitachi Rail has been given the reins. Other cities are watching — Los Angeles, Chicago and Washington, where ridership has declined.



The timing might be right.

Gimenez has hailed the production activity as an immediate economic stimulant while pointing to the long-term potential of a new light rail commuter-moving system. The idea is to make transit more attractive and convenient to passengers — so they use their automobiles less often. Particularly downtown.

Notably, millennials, the segment of the population in their 20s and 30s, are buying into the concept. Only half of millennials, for example, reportedly get their driver's licenses at 18, and they're growing up in the era of Uber. Also, while roads have been congested across the city, last December saw the arrival of a pilot Express Metrorail service to downtown, offered at peak hours in mornings and afternoons from Dadeland South and Palmetto stations. The Express cut the regular 17-minute travel time by almost a third.

Not by virtue of that new service — but certainly not hurting it — is the fact that downtown Miami is booming. Beginning last year and continuing through 2017, Miami's retail market is projected to add 1.4 million square feet of new leasable space. The activity is driven largely by mega-projects like Brickell City Centre, Miami Worldcenter and Miami Central. In addition, downtown's historic Main Street is getting a \$13 million reboot.

Flagler Street, home to the highest concentration of historic buildings in downtown, will soon come alive with enhanced pedestrian amenities thanks to large-scale revitalization funded by the City of Miami in coordination with the Miami Downtown Development Authority (DDA). The work coincides with significant private-sector interest in the major downtown artery.

“After years of planning,” says Ken Russell, City of Miami District 2 commissioner and Miami DDA chairman, “the pieces of downtown Miami’s retail market are painting a picture of diversity, with luxury brands, new-to-market retailers and homegrown entrepreneurs all looking to stake their claim in the urban core.”  
The same could be said for rail.

“Look at the world’s great cities and they all have one thing in common – a comprehensive mass transit system that connects communities together and brings people into the urban core,” comments Alyce Robertson, executive director of the Miami DDA.



“Miami has long lagged behind in this area, largely a result of its relative young history and love affair with its cars, but as our population reaches critical mass and demand for a more urban lifestyle grows, other solutions are desperately needed. (The) Metrorail expansion project will go a long way, particularly as today’s young professionals embrace alternative transit for its convenience and accessibility.”

That train of thought among millennials, along with downtown’s new bustle, could well be the boost rail needs in Miami.