

Tunnel plan under study for Brickell

BY CATHERINE LACKNER

Miami-Dade's Metropolitan Planning Organization has named Atkins North America to study the feasibility of tunneling under the Miami River near Brickell Avenue, an idea discussed since 1965.

The \$200,000 study, which will evaluate engineering, geology, hydrology, construction methods and project cost, is due next March 1, a planning organization document says. Atkins was picked from a pool of pre-qualified consulting firms, sources said.

Miami's Downtown Development Authority members have long said that improper Brickell Bridge openings cause Brickell traffic jams. The group has battled with the Florida Department of Transportation and the Coast Guard to enforce lockdown periods weekday mornings, lunchtimes and evening rush hours. But business interests along the river say frequent bridge openings are vital for their economic survival.

A March 2006 City of Miami study said the tunnel was feasible but that traffic volume didn't warrant digging it then, said Francis Suarez, Miami commissioner and planning organization vice chair when the planning group first considered the tunnel study last year.

"Obviously, nine years later, we've seen a tremendous amount of density in the Brickell and downtown corridor; I don't think anyone can argue with that," he said. "What's coming in the next five to 10 years is also enormous."

The finished study will be submitted electronically "to be posted in the MPO website and for further reproduction and distribution," the work order said.

That's good news for the downtown authority. "We're going to try to use information from the tunnel study when we go to the Florida Department of Transportation and the Coast Guard," said Executive Director Alyce Robertson in March. "We want to have that study in hand."