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Detouring commuter train around Sunrise neighborhood would cost \$81 million

By Michael Turnbell
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A change in the location of a proposed light rail line between Sawgrass Mills mall and the Fort Lauderdale airport would add \$81 million to a project that already faces steep hurdles to get federal funding.

The western end of the rail line is shifting to the west, from 136th Avenue in Sunrise to the heart of the Sawgrass Corporate Park.

Moving the route through the office park satisfies residents along 136th Avenue, who fumed last year when they learned the rail line would run through their neighborhood.

"With 136th Avenue, they were looking at the system as a negative, so the further away from people's houses the better," said Scott Seeburger, a project manager with the Florida Department of Transportation. "With us transportation guys, the thinking was the closer the route was to where people lived, the easier access they would have to be able to use it."

The Broward Metropolitan Planning Organization, a county board that prioritizes transportation projects, could vote on the change at its July 13 meeting.

The board approved an alignment in November 2004 that would have placed the line along Interstate 595 and connected it to Sawgrass Mills via 136th Avenue. No one protested then, but that changed as word got out.

"It would've been right behind us. There would have been a tremendous negative impact," said Lou Hendrix, who lives in Sunrise's New Orleans development east of 136th Avenue. "It wasn't just the noise. We had security concerns and traffic concerns."

The board later directed the Florida Department of Transportation to look at alternatives to 136th Avenue.

The state met with residents, businesses and Sunrise officials several times this year. Hendrix said the group's consensus was to move the route west of 136th Avenue and run it north along a canal that lies between Sawgrass Corporate Parkway and International Parkway.

The group then decided to curve the route east to 136th Avenue, just south of Sunrise Boulevard, and continue along the east side of 136th Avenue to BankAtlantic Center and Sawgrass Mills.



The original alignment had the trains running down the west side of 136th Avenue. That would have meant creating a railroad crossing on Northwest 22nd Place, the main entrance to the gated Sawgrass Preserve community south of the arena.

"That would've been totally unacceptable," said Stephen Lindsley, who lives in the Sawgrass Preserve. "It's 50 feet to some of the houses that back up to [136th Avenue]. That's where our kids' bus stop is."

The new route, which is one third of a mile longer, would cost \$201 million, compared with \$120 million for the original alignment along 136th Avenue. Seeburger said the costs are higher because of the added expense of burying utility lines underground or covering the canal.

The rest of the 21-mile light rail route runs along I-595, State Road 7, Broward Boulevard, Andrews Avenue and U.S. 1. A mostly elevated light-rail system would cost \$1 billion to build and \$21 million a year to operate, according to the state's estimates.

Work will begin on environmental study next month and take 30 months. Afterward, the project will be submitted to the Federal Transit Administration for review.

Federal officials judge projects by two main criteria: whether they have a dedicated funding source or a financial plan to help pay for construction and operations, and their cost efficiency.

To keep costs down and improve chances for winning federal approval, the state might submit one segment of the 21-mile route that could be built first. One analysis shows a segment from the universities in Davie to downtown Fort Lauderdale and the Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport could be built for \$649 million and attract 15,800 riders a day.

"We presented a case for a fundable project here. Somewhere, there's a piece of it that they could fund. They didn't say yes or no," Seeburger said of the federal transit agency's initial response. "Our job now is to refine the project."

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