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## Keep options open for light rail

The Florida Department of Transportation and the Broward County Commission are being woefully shortsighted by choosing to put three ground-level toll lanes in the Interstate-595 median. Yes, elevating the lanes at 50 feet costs more in the short term. But leaving room for an eventual light-rail line at grade level would be better in the long run, which, after all is what traffic planning is all about. The toll lanes will extend from the Florida Turnpike to I-75. If they are built at grade, the cost of a future light-rail system would be considerably more.

Critics say that there is no funding source right now for a light-rail system. Yet, it will be only a matter of time before the Legislature finds a dedicated source of funding, and the South Florida Regional Transportation Authority is then able to seek matching federal transit dollars.

The most disturbing aspect of the DOT's and commission's decision for ground-level lanes is that it wasn't based on cost, which might have been understandable under some circumstances, but on local objections to elevation.

Critics, including some cities, used an online website to raise questions about an elevated road. They are concerned about the road's potential impact on businesses, property values and law enforcement. Some people don't like the look of the elevated road and others worried about the need to build sound walls along some sections of I-595.

It was the DOT's responsibility, with an assist from county commissioners, to answer these questions to everyone's satisfaction before any decisions were made on the toll lanes. They could have pointed out, for instance, that an elevated road would be separated from property owners by a wide ditch with a steep slope, chain-link fences, side roads, on and off ramps and another, more narrow ditch next to developed property.

How much of a visual impact would an elevated road make under these conditions?

### Officials punted

Rather than respond to the concerns, officials punted. They simply rejected what had become controversial without bothering to determine if the opposition could be assuaged by the facts, or with adjustments and changes.

Construction of the project, whether elevated or at grade level, isn't set to start until 2009. However, design of the lanes will begin long before then. There still is time for the DOT and the County Commission to take a step back and do this project the right way.

They should weigh thoroughly all of the advantages and disadvantages of elevation before

making a binding decision. In other words, they should take the long view.

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