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Dade-Broward express buses will provide relief for commuters in 2010

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Miami-Dade commuters who work in Broward County and Broward commuters who work in Dade will soon be able to take express buses to and from work.

Starting in January, Broward County Transit and Miami-Dade Transit will launch the first full-fledged regional bus service between the two counties, adding buses that will connect downtown Miami with communities in northern and central Broward.

It marks the first time the transit agencies will operate deep into its neighboring county. For years now, the buses have stopped just over the county line -- with Miami-Dade buses traveling into Hallandale Beach and the Diplomat Mall, and Broward buses making stops at Aventura Mall and the Golden Glades Interchange in North Miami-Dade.

Transit managers have talked about such services in the past, but this is the first time they have committed to a start date and specific routes.

The project also comes during the recession, when public transit ridership is growing and Tri-Rail is facing severe cutbacks and possibly even closure.

The counties plan to launch the Interstate 95 express lanes bus service with about \$23 million in federal and state funding -- about \$15.8 million for Miami-Dade Transit and about \$7.2 million for BCT.

"The I-95 Express will provide an opportunity for South Floridians who might not otherwise use public transit to try it," said Chris Walton, BCT's transportation department director.

Commuters in both counties will be able to hop on a bus and travel deep into the neighboring county without switching buses at or near the county line.

For example, a commuter who lives in Coral Springs will be able to board BCT's 441 Breeze and travel to downtown Miami near Miami-Dade County Hall and then back up to Broward at the end of the work day.

Similarly, a commuter who lives in downtown Miami and works in Broward will be able to travel a Miami-Dade Transit bus from downtown to park-and-rides at I-95 and Sheridan Street and Broward Boulevard.

Northbound I-95 express lanes are already operating from just north of downtown Miami to the Golden Glades near the Broward line. Southbound express lanes are expected to be open by year's end.

Before entering I-95 express lanes at the Golden Glades Interchange in north Miami-Dade, Walton said, the BCT buses will pick up passengers along some of the busiest corridors in Broward, such as State Road 7 and

University Drive.

The I-95 routes are part of transit upgrades that also include new surveillance cameras and GPS tracking systems on Broward buses, as well as new hybrid and accordion buses in both counties.

After I-95, Walton said, BCT plans to add bus service on express lanes that will be built on Interstate 595.

"We are designing those routes now," he said, adding that they involve three or four routes from the western suburbs to Fort Lauderdale.

Reversible I-595 electronic toll express lanes and other parts of the reconstruction project are expected to be completed by 2014. But Walton said the I-595 bus service could begin as early as July or August 2010.

Some other BCT upgrades are being funded with money from the \$787 billion federal stimulus program for transportation.

A significant part of stimulus money will go toward building new bus shelters throughout Broward, Walton said.

Another BCT project involves upgrading surveillance cameras on buses and GPS tracking systems, said Walton.

"One of the great features about the new camera system is that it will allow live look-in," Walton said. "It will allow our supervisors to look into the bus to see what's going on. We will also provide that ability to law enforcement."

GPS, which tracks the county's 292 buses as they make their runs, will be upgraded from a 1995 model, said Walton. Miami-Dade has tracked its almost 900 buses with GPS since the 1990s, but has no plans to upgrade the system.