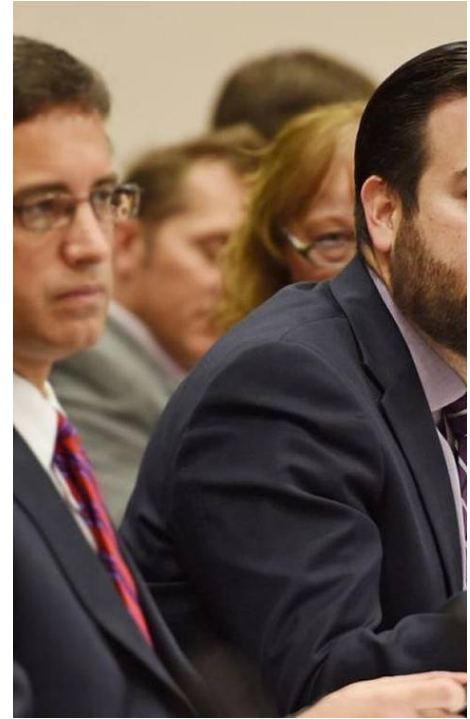


Miami's transit woes could be test for Legislature's conservatives



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BY MARY ELLEN KLAS
Herald/Times Tallahassee Bureau

TALLAHASSEE — The most pressing infrastructure project facing Miami-Dade County may provide a window into how the Republican-controlled Florida House and Senate — two bodies deeply divided over budget and ethics reforms — will govern in the next two years.

The largest, most powerful legislative delegation in the state is from Miami-Dade. The biggest, most expensive problem the delegation faces is how to get state funding for a massive mass transit expansion needed to relieve the county's legendary traffic snarls.

"Miami-Dade County suffers some of the worst congestion on the Eastern Seaboard," said Rep. Jose Felix Diaz, R-Miami, who was reelected the delegation's chairman on Tuesday.



MIAMI-DADE COUNTY SUFFERS SOME OF THE WORST CONGESTION ON THE EASTERN SEABOARD.

State Rep. Jose Felix Diaz, R-Miami

It is a growing county, fed by a big port, a big airport and "all projections indicate that congestion will just be getting worse and worse for the next 20 years," he said. "The only way to fix it is to invest as a state and as a community in mass transit. You're going to see a lot more of an honest assessment into what we need to do as a state."

But mass transit projects are expensive and typically viewed warily by conservative idealists who hold power in the Florida House. Newly elected Speaker Richard Corcoran, R-Land O'Lakes, has vowed to adhere to free-market, small-government ideals for the next two years. His successor, Rep. Jose Oliva, R-Miami, is expected to carry that mantra through when he becomes speaker from 2018-2020.

Selling Florida lawmakers on spending big for transportation projects in Miami may be a tough sell in a year when Corcoran has recently warned that the state could face as much as a \$1 billion budget deficit, fueled by declines in tourism spending in the wake of the Zika outbreak, years of tax reductions and rising Medicaid costs.

“They have to make some decisions,” said Sen. Oscar Braynon of Miami Gardens, the newly elected Senate Democratic leader. “Will they govern tilting to their ideology or will they govern for what’s best for the people of Miami-Dade County and the state? Because more often than not those two will not ally.”

For example, Braynon said there is “no private way for us to do mass transit, and it will require government spending and, ideologically, Republicans do not support government spending.”

So will Miami-Dade’s delegation persuade legislators from other parts of the state to support a light rail line because the state’s largest county is a vital economic engine for the state? “Or do they fall on the side of expecting people to get in their Lexus to cross the county?” Braynon asks. “They have to make a choice.”

Diaz said Miami-Dade is “a very unique county with the largest economic center of the state and proportionately we have received less than other counties in the budget and that does not go unnoticed by us.”

Legislative leaders have yet to announce whom they have selected to chair all the key committees, but Diaz, who has been named to head up the House Commerce Committee, said he expects Miami-Dade lawmakers to hold influential posts.

As an urban planning attorney, Diaz said he feels a “personal responsibility” to be focused on mass transit to fill the urban core, but he is deeply aware there is a cultural divide within the state about the value of such an investment.

“Mass transit is one of those very unique rural versus urban issues,” he said. “We’re excited the county has come up with a comprehensive plan for six different transit corridors. ... Stay tuned. I feel there is a way for our delegation to inject itself in a very important way.”

Diaz doesn’t think the big ticket price alone is enough to turn small-government proponents against the plan.

“Republicans have always believed in infrastructure investment,” he said. “But when it comes to congestion, we are failing in some of our urban areas.”

The House’s new rules at budget transparency will give an early clue as to how the House and Senate navigate their differences, and how Miami-Dade’s priorities fare.

The House will accept no new project to the budget unless it has also been filed as a traditional bill that can be reviewed and debated. The Senate leadership has said it will be more flexible and open to negotiations that result in late session budget amendments. Unless the House waives its rules, those amendments will be rejected, leading many lobbyists to predict a long summer of budget standoffs.

Rep. Carlos Trujillo, R-Miami, whom Corcoran has appointed to head up the powerful House Appropriations Committee, argues that it’s not about finding new money, but shifting existing resources into new priorities.

“Government doesn’t have a revenue problem — it’s a spending problem,” Trujillo said, reviving the conservative chestnut. “We have more than enough money. We’re just using it incorrectly.”



GOVERNMENT DOESN'T HAVE A REVENUE PROBLEM — IT'S A SPENDING PROBLEM.

Rep. Carlos Trujillo, R-Miami

For example, the Miami-Dade Expressway collects \$555,000 a day, and rather than spending it on widening roads “it should be used on light rail,” he said.

“We will not raise taxes,” to find the money to pay for infrastructure, he said. “We have the resources to put into light rail and other forms of mass transit, but that is going to come from existing money that is already there and is unencumbered. The future of transit in Miami is not more roads. People have to abandon their cars.”

“With great power comes great responsibility,” says Rep. Jeanette Nuñez, R-Miami, who last week was elected the first female Hispanic House speaker pro tempore, a largely ceremonial role that fills in for the speaker if he is unable to serve.

As a result, mass transit expansion will be a primary focus for the delegation, she said, and the options will vary.

“Should the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority be dismantled, given to the county or reworked?” she asked. “For far too long, they have been inattentive to the needs of their toll payers” and their policies have often ignored those on the west side of the county. She said, for example, the rebate program might better serve as a reduction in tolls.

Sen. Rene Garcia, R-Hialeah, believes that the powerful delegation will “want to fight for Dade County and bring resources down as we have always done.” But, he added, there has to be a balance. “We don’t want to jeopardize the rest of the state.”

Braynon believes that the balance will come if the language used in the debate by Republican leaders begins to change.

”It’s not about how big the government is. It’s not about how much money is spent,” he said. “Is this the best use of taxpayers’ money? All these things they can control because they are in control.”

Mary Ellen Klas can be reached at meklas@MiamiHerald.com. Follow her on Twitter [@MaryEllenKlas](https://twitter.com/MaryEllenKlas)



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