

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY FEBRUARY 7, 2017 8:44 PM

## Miami-Dade mayor takes seat on MDX toll board and eyes money for rail projects



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Miami-Dade's mayor will take a seat on the county's unpopular toll board at a time when elected officials want the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority to use its surging revenue to help pay for new rail projects.

The surprise move by the County Commission on Tuesday installs Mayor Carlos Gimenez as one of nine MDX board members, along with Commissioner Audrey Edmonson. The County Commission fills five of the seats, and broke with past practice Tuesday by naming one of its own and the mayor instead of civilians. Appointees by the Florida governor fill the other four seats.

MDX board members set toll rates for five of the county's busiest expressways, including the Dolphin and the Don Shula. Gimenez has been a critic of the agency, and once lobbied state lawmakers to make him the chairman of MDX's board. Gimenez has questioned why MDX issues rebates to heavy users instead of lowering tolls for all, as well as the significant cash flow from the agency.

After a widely unpopular expansion of tolls along the Dolphin and State Road 112 in late 2014, toll revenue surged more than 80 percent in two years to \$235 million.

Michael Hernández, Gimenez's spokesman, said that the mayor wants elected officials to sit on MDX and sees the agency getting more involved in funding the county's transit system.

"As the only countywide elected official on the MDX board, he would like to better incorporate MDX with Miami-Dade County," Hernández said. "After all, those are Miami-Dade residents paying the tolls."

Hernández said the mayor wants MDX to partner in the rail-expansion blueprint known as the SMART plan that a November consultants report says could cost more than \$6 billion, but which the county says can be built for less than \$4 billion.

MDX already helps pay for county transit projects, including a new Park-and-Ride hub along the Dolphin. And MDX leaders have said they'll consider subsidizing rail lines along expressways they maintain. But some county officials see the MDX money as more central to the SMART plan; Commissioner Xavier Suarez wrote state lawmakers last year demanding \$50 million a year from the toll agency to help fund new rail lines.

One of Gimenez's sons, Carlos J. Gimenez, is registered to lobby MDX board members and administrators on behalf of contractor MCM, according to the most recent registration data on the agency's website. He filed his registration form in late 2015 at a time when MCM was bidding on MDX projects it did not win, MDX spokesman Mario Diaz said. Board members must recuse themselves from items with ties to family members, and that would include the mayor's son, Diaz said.

Hernández said the younger Gimenez would not be lobbying MDX in the future. "C.J. Gimenez cannot lobby Miami-Dade County or the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority as long as his father is mayor or is on the board of the MDX," he said. C.J. Gimenez did not respond to a request for comment.

There was no public notice that Gimenez and Edmonson were being considered for the MDX seats. Usually board appointments are placed on the commission agenda a week in advance. But on Tuesday, commission chairman Esteban "Steve" Bovo won approval to suspend the commission's rules to make the appointments. Edmonson was not available for an interview.

Commissioners also reappointed advertising executive Maritza Gutiérrez to her MDX seat. The Florida Legislature last year approved shrinking the MDX board from 13 members to nine. That meant the loss of two county seats, and Gimenez and Edmonson took two existing seats. MDX members losing their seats in the switch are Maurice Ferré, a former Miami mayor, lawyers Vincent Brown and Alfredo Gonzalez, and Rick Rodriguez Piña, who runs a lobbying firm.



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