

TOLL ROADS

# Miami-Dade Republicans might finally kill the MDX, but the tolls will remain

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Local legislators might finally destroy Miami-Dade's MDX toll agency, but a new tolling regime promises to take its place.

The Florida House on Wednesday passed legislation to dissolve the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority, the toll board that in 2014 infuriated motorists by expanding collection points on the Airport and Dolphin expressways and ending free tolling.

"The MDX has really let the community down," said sponsor Rep. Bryan Avila, a Republican from Miami Springs, lambasting MDX board members from the House floor. "They certainly don't have the public's best interests at heart. I would argue they probably have their contractors' best interests at heart."

If the Senate goes along, Avila's legislation would finally claim a favorite target of Miami-Dade's Republican delegation in Tallahassee, which has passed laws to crack down on a toll agency now led by the county's Republican mayor.

By August, the new Greater Miami Expressway Agency would take over the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority. Avila's bill tweaks the governance structure of the MDX to create the "GMX," but there's one blanket rule in the bill: no current members of the board may sit on

has current MDX leaders complaining of retribution.

"How does this bill actually help the community?" MDX board member Luz Weinberg asked this week at what could be one of the agency's final meetings. "It is a personal attack on every one of us sitting on this board."

The current MDX toll rates would remain in place if the bill passes, and the new toll board run by county and Tallahassee appointees takes over from a board currently run by county and Tallahassee appointees. It would freeze toll rates through 2029 for a board that voted this year to freeze toll rates indefinitely.

The bill also instructs the new agency to implement an automatic 25 percent rebate program for local vehicles paying at least \$150 a year in tolls electronically through SunPass devices. MDX currently offers a 15 percent rebate program for any vehicle enrolled with MDX that pays at least \$250 in tolls a year. The bill sets the 25 percent rebate as a goal, so it could be lower if the numbers don't work.

MDX's backers are still sounding the fiscal alarm about the changes. Carlos Gimenez, the county mayor or who also serves as MDX's chairman, is waging the fiercest legislative fight of his eight years in office to try and kill the bills by Avila and his Senate partner, Manny Diaz Jr., R-Hialeah Gardens.

Gimenez's deputy mayor for finance, Ed Marquez

not afford both the rebate program and the proposed \$1 billion extension of the 836 into West Kendall. The extension is a favorite project of the mayor that has been approved by the county commission, and Avila and Diaz say they want to protect it. But Marquez's analysis said MDX or its successor would run out of money by 2025 if it tried to do both the new toll road and the rebate.

The same day, the Fitch ratings firm warned it may downgrade more than \$1 billion in MDX debt that the new toll agency would inherit, citing "an unprecedented level of political intervention" in setting the toll rates needed to pay back bondholders. Marquez said a significant downgrade could raise the cost of borrowing for the MDX by as much as \$250 million over 30 years.

"This whole thing could cost about a quarter-of-a-billion dollars," Gimenez said Thursday, "and it's all because they want to change the name." //

The fight over the MDX has only involved office holders from Miami-Dade, and Wednesday's floor debate had local Democrats trying to poke holes in the bill and their local Republican counterparts praising it.

"If the MDX is the problem, allow the local people to deal with MDX," Rep. Kionne McGhee, leader of the House Democrats, said before Avila's bill passed 80-33. Its companion bill in the Senate passed its final committee

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then need to be consolidated and adopted by both chambers.

The county's lobbying operation sees the Senate version as more likely to become law. That's a relief to transit administrators, since the House version includes a provision that would eliminate what's currently an \$80 million subsidy of transit operations from the county's half-percent sales tax for transportation.

Earlier this month, Gimenez secured a County Commission endorsement of his alternative plan: creating a new toll authority that would run the MDX roads and the county portion of the Florida Turnpike, and using state toll dollars to cut tolls across the entire system and kick in nearly \$2 billion for county transportation projects. But his proposal doesn't have a sponsor in Tallahassee, and Gimenez said he's having trouble convincing lawmakers to side with him over fellow Miami-Dade representatives.

"Do they want to get involved in our food fight?" Gimenez said this week. "For me, I don't see it in the rest of the state where your local elected representatives are actually