

Officials in no hurry for interim fixes while awaiting tunnel

BY RISA POLANSKY

The on-again, off-again Port of Miami Tunnel project appears to be back on – but could be completed years later than anticipated.

Some public and private sector officials say something must be done in the interim to address port access and downtown traffic.

Most call the tunnel the only solution and say if it isn't built on time, we'll just have to wait it out.

Experts for more than two decades have studied options for removing rumbling cargo trucks from downtown Miami and improving access to the port, with the tunnel connecting Watson Island and the port consistently emerging as the answer, said Kevin Lynskey, business initiatives manager for the port. "And nobody has really come up with a partial solution that satisfies anyone."

To ensure the long-anticipated underwater tubes are built as soon as possible, local propo-

nents are holding out for the state to cement a contract with the team tapped in 2007 to design, build, operate and maintain the \$1 billion-plus project, though state officials favor re-opening procurement for new bidders.

Restarting could add years to the process.

Florida Department of Transportation Secretary Stephanie Kopelousos in December attempted to shelve the tunnel, citing financing issues with the selected contractor.

The unexpected announcement enraged local elected officials, who for months have relentlessly pushed to keep the tunnel project alive, pointing to a new, willing equity partner to strengthen the existing deal.

In a letter last week, Ms. Kopelousos laid out four options for keeping the tunnel project afloat:

- Re-establishing negotiations with the selected team of contractors

- Negotiating with the firm

ranked second place in 2007

- Beginning a new procurement process with Miami-Dade at the helm

- Beginning a new procurement process led by the state

In light of the highly competitive bidding and lower project costs that have come as a result of the sluggish economy, Ms. Kopelousos recommended restarting procurement.

She called for meetings with city, county and state officials to lay out a schedule and funding strategies by July 1 "in order to proceed with the development of this project."

Though the state has indicated its preference, "it is absolutely the local preference that we continue to work with the [selected] concession team," Mr. Lynskey said, in hopes of completing the tunnel on – or nearly – on time: by late 2013 or early 2014.

Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Alvarez said the same in a letter Tuesday.

"We must re-establish and fi-

nalize negotiations" with the original contractor, he wrote, predicting the alternatives could spark legal action that would hold up the project.

He recommended a meeting before April 17 "attended only by a few" to make the final call.

The tunnel was meant to open in time to accommodate the increased cargo traffic expected when a newly expanded Panama Canal opens in 2014.

In tandem, the plan is also to deepen the port's channel to make way for the bigger ships many anticipate the canal will bring.

At the same time, officials have mobilized to devise a plan for optimizing railways to move cargo.

All are meant to happen in conjunction, Mr. Lynskey said.

"Everything kind of converges in the solution that's on the table," he said – the tunnel.

And even if the channel is dredged and the port develops an intermodal system to utilize

rail, the downtown traffic the tunnel is designed to ease goes unaddressed, he said.

"That problem will remain unrelieved."

With downtown traffic in mind, the tunnel "is a top priority," said Alyce Robertson, executive director of the Downtown Development Authority, "and it just needs to get done."

She, like Mr. Lynskey, referenced years of study and said that when it comes to really solving the truck traffic issue, it's tunnel or nothing.

"They've studied various different proposals to get to the tunnel, and the tunnel came up as the very best way to deal with this," she said. "If there were an easy interim solution, that would have been raised a long time ago, I think."

No stop-gap measure could solve access problems like the tunnel could, agreed Jorge Roviroso, executive vice president of Florida Stevedoring, director of the Port of Miami Terminal Operating Company and vice chairman of the Miami-Dade Metropolitan Organization's Freight Transportation Advisory Committee.

"The future access to the port is through the tunnel, no doubt about it," he said. In the meantime, "I don't see anything else that we can do."

However, he and the members of the freight committee hope to resurrect plans for a "slip ramp" onto Interstate I-95

Supporters say the ramp would improve access to west-bound State Road 836 for not only port-related traffic but for all motorists via a ramp on Northwest Sixth Street designed to allow traffic to "slip" onto I-95.

The Florida Department of Transportation pulled the idea from its work plan in 2003 after area residents objected to it.

The planning organization governing board, made up of county commissioners and municipal officials, killed the proposal two years ago, citing potential disruption in Overtown, among other issues.

But the ramp is vital — and not only for cargo industry players, Mr. Roviroso said.

It's "still extremely important not necessarily because of port pressures, but the fact that we've got new housing and new development in the downtown area."

At least one planning organization board member has embraced the idea.

North Miami Mayor Kevin Burns said he intends to bring the slip ramp back to the forefront now that the tunnel issue is moving.

"The slip ramp was proposed in conjunction with the tunnel, and they both would serve a purpose," he said.

The slip ramp could be built quickly, but the tunnel could be a ways off, he said, and "in the meantime, we just can't continue to have the constant gridlock of all the trucks at the port...things just cannot stay the way they are."