

More People, More Cars, More Headaches

That's what Art Noriega, Miami's parking czar, grapples with every day

Art Noriega on downtown Miami: "The traffic congestion is going to be almost impossible."

By Jim Mullin

BT Editor

Someday Miami will have a sophisticated, fully functioning mass-transit system. Just not in our lifetimes. Which means that for another generation or more we'll be battling clogged roadways and increasingly frequent gridlock, especially in and around Miami's central business district. Parking all those cars presents a major challenge, especially in the burgeoning neighborhoods along the Biscayne Corridor, from downtown through Edgewater, Midtown, and the Upper Eastside.

Meeting that challenge is the responsibility of XX-year-old Art Noriega, executive director of Miami's Department of Off-Street Parking, better known as the Miami Parking Authority. The self-sustaining agency manages more than 30,000 parking spaces throughout the city, spread over nearly 80 surface lots and 11 garages, with more under construction.

After recently being trapped in a massive traffic snarl between the Triple-A and the Carnival Center, and after fielding one too many complaints about parking problems in the MiMo District, we decided it was time to visit Noriega and ask a few questions, which he amiably and adroitly answered in his windowless tomb of an office beneath a downtown parking garage.

Traffic congestion in the Miami area is among worst in the nation. In terms of lost productivity and gas consumption alone the figures are staggering. By building more parking facilities, is the Miami Parking Authority actually contributing to traffic congestion?

Wow, this is a question I get asked a lot. I'll tell you that parking is a function of the options available to the commuter. Unfortunately, as a

community we don't have what I would call an incredibly robust mass-transit infrastructure, and so we've become a "vehicle-friendly" commuting environment. Because of that, we need somewhere to put those cars. I'm a huge proponent of mass transit; I think it's incredibly important. We still have a lot of opportunities with park-and-ride components along the transit lines. I'm not in the transit business so I'm not going to speak for them, but it would be beneficial to do a really comprehensive park-and-ride promotion. We haven't done enough of that here. The problem is that people aren't giving up their vehicles because they don't have a reasonable alternative.

What could MPA do to encourage a reduction in the reliance on private vehicles? Offer incentives for carpoolers?

There are already incentives for carpoolers. Commuter Services does a great program that promotes carpooling. The only option we have is maybe providing some sort of incentive that relates to the actual parking fee.

Suppose you said, "Certified carpoolers park free downtown"?

You could do that, I guess, and there may be some real legitimate need, especially now in the [downtown] core, partially because the parking inventory is getting squeezed a bit. So it would make a lot of sense to try and promote that now. That's a great suggestion.

What about the idea of promoting clean vehicles?

You're right. In terms of clean vehicles, that's actually another excellent suggestion — to do something that really incentivizes that sort of transition. Those are things we just haven't focused on yet. [Editor's note: Miami Beach recently instituted parking measures that reward owners of hybrid vehicles, including reduced rates and reserved spaces.]

What can you tell us about a consultant's study of the Upper Eastside, where parking for shoppers and diners is almost nonexistent?

It's being done by Tim Haas & Associates. There are two corridors being assessed
— Biscayne Boulevard and NE 2nd Avenue between 50th and 79th

streets. The intent is to identify the existing [parking] inventory along the corridor, what the various uses are now, what the potential uses could be, and then analyze what the deficiency is now and project what the deficiencies could be when everything gets built out. They're going into the field and they literally walk site by site — weekdays, nights, weekends, that kind of thing.

MiMo is a long, linear district, just like Coral Way. We're finishing up a Coral Way study. It's the exact same kind of problem, where you have a linear commercial district bounded by residential on both sides. And what happens is that, in specific areas, commercial parking traffic will spill over into residential, which brings huge problems. What makes a lot of sense is that, if you do have a parking problem, you don't mass all the parking in one or two areas; you spread it out into small inventories throughout, and you marry that with a small little circulator [shuttle] that would run along the corridor. I talked to [Miami-Dade] Transit about maybe doing a circulator up there, and what would it cost. I got some numbers and shared that information with Commissioner Sarnoff's office. You could literally do a park-and-ride scenario up along that corridor.

Has MPA missed an opportunity to pick up some property along the Boulevard at reasonable prices?

No, I think now the opportunity may be even better. If we had tried to buy property when it was at its peak, we never could have afforded it. But this isn't just about buying land. It might be about partnering with existing landowners. You can't buy land and then expect to build a parking lot or a parking garage. That's never the highest and best use, which is how everybody wants to value their land when they're selling it to you. So the idea in those scenarios is to partner with people who already own property, lease from them on a short-term or long-term basis, improve the site, develop some parking. And then you deal with the long-term issues as market demand changes. So you have a short-term solution that evolves into a long-term solution. Part of the study is to identify sites that would be good locations for parking inventories.

Like the old Boulevard motels?

Some of those older motels have parking inventory that's way underutilized. They're not involved in what we call a "shared use," so it's

underutilized and could be outsourced to a public use. It only makes sense to do that if you have a public agency like ours partnering with a half-dozen different property owners to create one parking system, so to speak, that is a shared parking system. Then the private operators get to benefit from that increase in revenue. It does make a lot of sense.

What's going on in Edgewater? Seems like more pay-and-display and more parking meters are going up.

You know, it's interesting. I had [auto dealer] Norman Barman come in because he had a huge parking problem with his employees. His employees, along with every construction worker in the business, have been parking on the street for a long time.

Free of charge.

Right, free of charge, and very unregulated. So it becomes this finger-pointing thing: Who's right is it to get access to the on-street space? The whole area was unregulated, driveways were being blocked, it's been chaos. It had never needed to be regulated before, but like a lot of other areas of the city, these things change. In a lot of cases, what we'll do is put meters but then offer a decal program to allow people to park there during the day, and the decals are always pretty low-cost. Every area is different, every half-block is different, depending on the specific business or use that may generate traffic or be impacted by whatever regulation we put in an area.

Here's one concern some of our readers have: East of the Boulevard it's virtually all residential. Multifamily buildings built years ago never ever had enough parking, so there's a squeeze. They have to park on the west side, even though a lot of people don't like it because it's dark and there aren't as many eyes on the street. Women in particular don't like it. And now many of those streets are getting meters. A small bomb could be ticking because people don't know where to go.

That's an interesting point. Maybe we can look into creating a residential parking program for that area, where we make it time-restricted like we do in downtown — night and weekend use. That actually hadn't been brought to my attention.

What does MPA envision for the future Museum Park and its

surrounding area, which will try to accommodate two museums, a new park, nearly a dozen high-rise condo buildings, and crowds drawn simultaneously to the American Airlines Arena, the performing arts center, and maybe Bayfront Park?

There's a little humor in this, so take it for what it's worth. I had one meeting with the city and the science museum, about two years ago. Then I didn't have meetings with anybody until very recently. The museum has added some additional uses -- an aquarium, things along those lines. So they came to us and said, "Here's the parking we're currently planning. What do you think, and what do you think it would cost?" It's all underground parking, with the exception of a small surface area.

This is just the science museum?

No, what was laid out in front of me was all the parking inventory for the whole park. Here's what I told them: I said, "Look, you have some inherent advantages with that park. First of all, you have a Metromover stop that's sitting on top of the park and it's closed right now. It could be up and working in a matter of 30 days."

So they said, "Yeah, Transit told us they were going to do it once we build out the park."

I said, "Okay, so you have this great transit stop, which is going to bring people to your front door, so let's talk about what'll happen to you 120 days or nights of the year. You've got [events at] the Carnival Center and the American Airlines Arena, and you're going to want patrons coming into your Museum Park. How are they physically going to get to your parking? It's located on the east side of Biscayne Boulevard — the hardest side to get to. You think they're going to make that trip after the second time they try it? No, they're not. What they're going to want to do is find a way around all that traffic. And the first option is going to be Metromover. And to get on the Metromover, they'll have to know they have access to it later than ten o'clock at night, and that it's going to be safe, and that the homeless are not going to be riding it all night, and that it's an environment that's extremely friendly and inviting to them. Because if you think you're going to drive all those cars into this park, you're kidding yourself. You're just going to frustrate people."

What I told them to do was save money on parking, build a lot less. In fact I even told them: “You should have no employee parking at the park. Every one of your employees ought to have a pass and they all ought to be commuting into the park — that’s just a prerequisite. You want to work at the park? Okay, we’re going to give you a pass and you’re going to take the Metromover. We’re not giving you any parking.”

The biggest complaints I get about Metromover are that the cars are dirty, they’re old, the homeless ride them all day, nobody feels safe, and they don’t run often enough. One thing we could do is go back to charging for the Metromover, reinstitute a quarter rate or a monthly pass or whatever — get the homeless off of it.

The Carnival Center is another example. You have a Metromover stop a half-block from the center, but nobody wants to ride it, in part because it’s not connected to the building. You have to walk literally half a block. All you have to do is build a canopy, a covered walkway. That’s got to cost less than that bridge they built over Biscayne Boulevard. To get people out of their cars, you have to create a perfect environment.

>From an infrastructure standpoint, downtowns aren’t ever built to accommodate so much vehicular traffic, and we have all of our businesses, all of our destinations pushed all the way to the east side of downtown. You have to get people from the highway to the destinations through a lot of small little two-lane roads. The traffic congestion is going to be almost impossible. So to answer the question, Museum Park is not the same kind of problem they’re having at the performing arts center. It’s still in the planning stages, so there’s a lot of room to get that right.

Feedback: letters@biscaynetimes.com

See AOL's top rated recipes (<http://food.aol.com/top-rated-recipes?NCID=aoltop00030000000004>)