

Senior city staff and I recently took a trip to Washington, D.C., to engage in discussions with a firm that could hold the future to resolving the issue of a commuter rail crossing at the New River downtown.

The name of this firm is Meridiam, a company which was part of a consortium that built the tunnel linking downtown Miami to the adjacent port.

The French-based firm specializes in developing, financing and managing long-term public infrastructure projects. And, it has been closely following the debate in Fort Lauderdale between whether a tunnel or bridge should be built for the rail system.

We spent almost two hours talking to Meridiam's North American executives about the project's status, why the city favors a tunnel and what hurdles lie ahead for each New River crossing concept.

They were very interested in what we proposed. We hope Meridiam will start a dialogue with the county and the Florida Department of Transportation about building the tunnel as a public-private partnership.

This approach, also known as a P3, is how they built the port tunnel for Miami. That project came in under budget and ahead of schedule with the work occurring in a geotechnical environment very similar to that in Fort Lauderdale.

In our meeting, city officials and our consultants laid out the problematic nature of a bridge, particularly its impact on the marine industry and surrounding street-level traffic.

Imagine 100s of additional trains crossing through downtown. Broward Boulevard and other major arteries would face frequent traffic tie-ups as trains cross by, and the bridge would be down so frequently that boatyards upriver would lose substantial business because they'd be unable to move yachts in and out.

We also discussed the impact to downtown.

No matter how creative a bridge is designed, it would impact the ongoing transformation of the area into a vibrant urban center. In some cases, the bridge would cut right through approved development projects, while many others would be impacted by the traffic delays. Also, the historic district and Riverwalk would be in the shadow of a bridge, with supports looming over the New River Inn and neighboring historic properties.

Most importantly, our consultants laid out their analysis of how a tunnel could be built for substantially less than what the county and state have contended and also built without the disruption to daily life both during construction and afterwards.

Our consultants also raised serious concerns about the county's bridge proposal.

The county actually builds four bridges and demolishes two.

They build a temporary bridge for freight service to use as they demolish the existing drawbridge, then they build a new bridge for the freight service at water level and demolish the temporary bridge, and finally they build 40-foot-tall bridges for passenger service.

All these bridges apparently cost \$420 million, even though the state once projected one new bridge would cost that amount.

The consultants noted as well that Southwest 5th Street would be permanently closed, and Southwest 2nd Street would be impassable for truck traffic. There remain questions about the need for private property being seized by eminent domain and whether construction would severely interfere with street traffic, marine traffic and freight service.

No money is reserved for a required commuter station. And the one viable solution to the street-level gridlock being proposed would shut down Broward Blvd. for two years!!

We look forward to continuing our discussions with Meridiam as well as with the county and state. The best way forward likely involves Meridiam or a similar firm stepping forward with a proposal. This project truly calls for a dynamic partner with international construction expertise and an understanding of financing.

Commission goals for 2025

In mid-January, the City Commission met to lay out our priorities for the new year. Once again, the top issues for us are public safety, infrastructure, traffic, the affordability of housing, the growing homeless population and community initiatives.

In public safety, we are adding six police officers and 28 firefighters to provide more coverage for our growing community. We are also funding an innovative recruitment program in the Police Department to assist with filling vacant positions and starting a trial program of deploying cameras in school zones to deter speeding.

Our new police station will open this year, and two fire stations are in the design-build stage. We will begin looking for a site for a new fire station to service Flagler Village in light of its growth.

And, we are hiring a mental health clinician to work with police officers when they respond to calls of someone in distress. The clinician will work with officers to de-escalate the situation and gain voluntary compliance.

With infrastructure, we are continuing with our commitment of investing \$1.6 billion in improving our water, sewer and stormwater utilities. Construction of our new water plant

continues, as does our Fortify Lauderdale program to mitigate flooding. We are on pace to complete flood control work in three to four neighborhoods a year.

We are hiring a chief waterway officer to oversee programs directed at monitoring our canals and rivers and improving their health. Commissioners unanimously said we want to add more sites to regularly monitor water quality.

We also will look at ways to finance an expansion of our annual road repair budget and launch a program to improve sidewalks citywide.

And, commissioners told our administration that the park bond program must be expedited. Voters agreed to borrow money in 2020 to pay for parks improvements, and we need to move faster to complete the job.

With homelessness, we have expanded the number of police officers and outreach personnel assigned to getting people off the streets and into housing or needed services. This team has been enforcing the new state law prohibiting public camping, with the vast majority of people either moving voluntarily or accepting referrals to social services to address issues like mental health or substance abuse.

We asked the police chief to look at turning the old city jail that closed some two decades ago into a rehabilitation center. This would allow judges to direct people arrested for camping, panhandling or similar charges to the facility for assistance.

We look forward to an exciting 2025 for Fort Lauderdale as we work hard with our staff and neighbors to build a better community and ensure our future as a great place to live and work.

In closing, please join in offering congratulations to Rickelle Williams. The City Commission has unanimously selected her to be our next city manager. Rickelle comes to us from Miami Beach, where she has been an assistant city manager and economic development director. She briefly served as that community's acting city manager last year.

We look forward to finalizing her hiring and having her on board in the coming weeks.