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In this file photo, the Brickell Avenue Bridge stops traffic. **CARL JUSTE** - cjuste@miamiherald.com

The bridge that drives us mad in the middle of downtown Miami

The Brickell Avenue Bridge could be likened to the beating heart of downtown Miami, pumping traffic across the river at the very crossroads where the metropolis originated as “Sweet Water.” But for those who live, work and visit center city, it is a diseased heart, badly in need of bypass surgery.

“It’s a clogged heart,” Miami City Commissioner Francis Suarez said. “The bridge is the cause of paralysis. We need a cure.”

Relief for the gridlock that ensues whenever the drawbridge is raised may finally be in sight. Talks between the Downtown Development Authority, which has steadfastly advocated for improved traffic flow, and the Florida Department of Transportation, which owns the bridge, have accelerated, and a problem-solving plan is being finalized, said Ken Russell, the city commissioner who is also chair of the DDA.

In the short term, rules that regulate the opening times of the bridge would be strictly enforced and the rush-hour periods when the bridge cannot be opened would be lengthened. In the long term, a tunnel under the Miami River would be constructed.

It’s a balancing act between drivers and pedestrians who must get across the bridge and boat captains who must get under the bridge to use the working waterway, which has 25 boatyards and marinas on its banks.

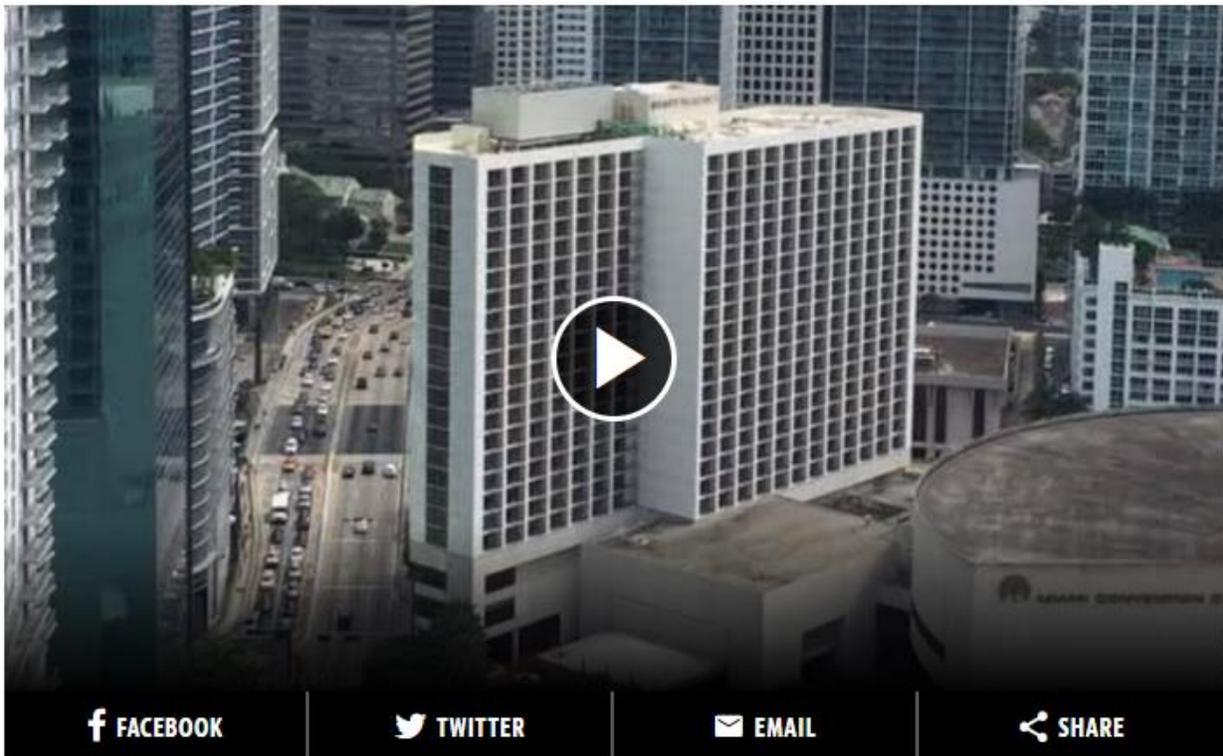
“They really are opposing interests — you help residents and commuters and then you’re hurting the marine

industry,” Russell said. “There are a lot of stakeholders with this bridge. But we have reached a breaking point, and that pain is giving us the will for a unified solution.”

A study by DDA member Richard Lydecker’s lawfirm found that improper and random openings of the bridge by tenders — usually to accommodate pleasure-boat traffic — was a major cause of bottlenecks that extend all the way to I-95.

“Just recently, I was trying to get to work and traffic was not moving because the bridge was up and 10 minutes later when I finally got through three lights, the bridge went up again,” said Robert Hill, general manager of the Intercontinental Miami hotel.

“It seems like there is no schedule. We have more residents, more offices, more hotels, more shopping, the Brickell City Center, Museum Park — and a huge headache not only up and down the Biscayne Boulevard and Brickell Avenue corridor, but also getting onto and exiting I-95 because of the bridge.”



Busy Brickell Avenue Bridge brings blocked streets

On Monday, May 23, 2016, the high traffic of pedestrians, cars, and trucks across the Brickell Bridge causes travel to be frustrating and sometime unsafe. Miami’s Downtown Development Authority says the Florida Department of Transportation has exacerbated rush hour congestion by ignoring laws that limit when the bridge can be opened.

The DDA, FDOT and the city agree that extending bridge lockdown hours by 30 minutes in the morning and evening is a priority. The new hours would be 7:35 a.m. to 9:30 a.m.; 12:05 p.m. to 12:59 p.m. and 4:35 p.m. to 5:59 p.m.

FDOT District 6 Secretary James Wolfe is coordinating with the Coast Guard to change the schedule. The DDA passed a resolution recommending improved signage and electronic automation of hand-written bridge-tender logs.

“The logs are not particularly accurate,” Russell said. “We’d like placement of a camera that can monitor openings in real time and let the tender know he is being watched.”

But ultimately, downtown growth calls for a tunnel, an idea that now has support from the DDA, the Miami River Commission, the city and FDOT, Russell said.

“Maurice Ferré almost got it approved on the budget — that’s how many years we’ve been talking about a tunnel,” Russell said of the former Miami mayor who served from 1973 to 1985.

The density of the downtown area has tripled in recent years to 24,000 people per square mile, about a quarter of the density of Manhattan, Suarez said.

“We’ve added 90,000 people to the core in the last decade — which in itself is twice the size of Coral Gables or Doral,” Suarez said. “We estimate \$40,000 of lost economic activity to local businesses every single time the bridge is raised, which adds up to \$10 million per year.”

Suarez ticked off a half-dozen projects in the works, including the redevelopment of the Capital Grille complex by the Related Group and the demolition of the Vitas building that will only add to congestion.

The estimated cost of building a tunnel is \$850 million. Suarez and Russell are optimistic that a funding plan that would divide the cost among the state, county and city could be hammered out.

“People thought the tunnel to the Port of Miami was just a pipe dream and look what a positive transformation it has made,” Russell said.

The next step is placing the tunnel project on the Miami-Dade Metropolitan Planning Organization’s priority list and FDOT’s five-year capital plan.

“Our transportation infrastructure has not kept pace with our growth,” Suarez said. “Anyone who is working or living downtown deserves a better quality of life.”