

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item F-1
January 23, 2024
City Commission Chambers
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Vince Lago

Vice Mayor Rhonda Anderson

Commissioner Melissa Castro

Commissioner Ariel Fernandez

Commissioner Kirk Menendez

City Staff

City Attorney, Cristina Suárez

City Manager, Peter Iglesias

City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Public Speaker(s)

Sebastian Loria

Geo

Agenda Item F-1 [11:32 a.m.]

Discussion regarding MetroConnect
(Sponsored by Commissioner Menendez)

Mayor Lago: Moving onto item F-1, which is time certain for 11 a.m., I apologize, we're 30 minutes late. How are you sir?

Mr. Loria: Good. How are you doing, Mr. Mayor?

Mayor Lago: Thank you for being here with us.

Mr. Loria: Excellent. Good morning, Commissioners, Mayor, Vice Mayor, city team. I believe there's a presentation that should accompany. While that is being pulled up here, okay, excellent. Thank you very much. So, good morning, my name is Sebastian Loria, and I'm a member of Via Transportation. So, before we get started, just want to say thank you for giving us the time today to talk about our company and the service that we're running across the county here called
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MetroConnect. For those of you who do not know Via, we are the company that is powering MetroConnect, which is the county-wide metro transit service. The service of course operates here in the City of Coral Gables as well, and that's what brings us here today. So, these terms are unfamiliar, not a problem, that's what we're going to cover here today. So, with our brief time this morning, I'm going to walk the Commission through just a few items here. First, I want to give you an introduction to our company and give you a brief overview of our work pioneering micro-transit, also known as, sorry, On Demand Transit, also known as Micro-Transit. Two, I'm going to give an overview of the MetroConnect Program that currently operates across the county. From there, number three, I want to give a deep dive into Coral Gables and the service that we've been running across your city; and then finally, I want to share how cities like Coral Gables can partner with MetroConnect to provide the best on-demand transit services for the residents and visitors. So, Via, who are we? We are a company that has been reinventing community transit for over a decade now. We started out as a company operating tech-enabled shared ride systems in one of the world's busiest cities. So, this started out twelve years ago, when we launched the first at-scale micro-transit system in New York City. Since then, we've partnered with hundreds of transit agencies and cities much like Coral Gables across the world, to move riders around their communities. How it works is pretty simple but powerful. Riders are able to indicate where they are, where they want to go, either over the phone or via a rider app. Our algorithms then route vans and vehicles to these riders, pick them up and drop them off in shared rides in their service zone, in their service area, right. So true on-demand transit for a community. And so, with this technology with our operational experience, what this results in is a transit service that's as comfortable and convenient as a private car, while also being sustainable, shared accessible and centered around your community. We'll get into a little bit more detail about Coral Gables here, but often I hear there's too much traffic in Miami, or we already have an on-demand provider. What makes Via different? What is the differentiator? And I think really the difference goes back to our history, as one of the first micro-transit movers that learned this business in one of the most difficult transit cities in the world, New York City where we first launched this. And so, if you take a look at the results, I think those are pretty clear. So, to date, we are the world's leading provider of public mobility solutions across the world. We have over 700 partners in 40 cities and powered over 125 million rides from our platform. So not only have we built what I think is the best micro-transit on-demand software, we also operate our own services like we do here for the entirety of the county through MetroConnect. And what that lets us do is it improves our product on a global scale, it allows us to provide our product on a global scale. And so, while we have global reach, we're actually really proud of what we're doing here in Florida as well, and we're trying to spread the word about our services and our company that is serving communities all across Florida. So, in Florida alone, we've already powered over a million rides, and have had a major impact for quite a few partners, two of which I want to highlight here today. So, Sarasota County on the other coast, we have helped them reduce their wait time for their transit services pretty significantly, depending on the part of the city, and then I want to call out with particular focus just north of here in Port Saint Lucy. We worked with the transit team there to replace a previous micro-transit provider and actually doubled their ridership and their efficiency in the service in just the first six months. So, we take our global scale, but we are local, and we customize our solutions for your communities in cities like Coral Gables. So, all this to say, in the business of moving people around cities that are dynamic, and times congested, Via really excels. We do this quickly; we do it cost-effectively for our partners. So, turning to Miami-Dade County here,

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we in partnership with the Department of Transportation and Public Works, have seen phenomenal success for our micro-transit service Metro-Connect. So, we actually launched in 2020 a four-zoned pilot and since then have grown to over 11 zones, with over 45 vehicles, after seeing phenomenal demand for these services. And so, where do we stand today? Well, we have over 60,000 riders on the platform, we've completed over a quarter of a million of trips to date and that's growing very quickly, and with the recent expansion as of October 1st, we now access, we have one million-plus accessible new riders that can access the MetroConnect program. So, this view here, its countywide, what you're seeing is a countywide system, but really part of what we're focusing on is building a system that allows cities like Coral Gables to leverage the best micro-transit offering to move residents, visitors, employees around your municipality in around very easily, seamlessly and just a very simple Via-rider experience. So, Cutler Bay in the southeast here, was actually our first partner city that bought into this city/county model, and from there they've seen phenomenal return on their investment for the usage of the local funds for these specific transit services. So, before I turn to Coral Gables specifically, I just want to highlight a few other things that I think really differentiate Via and MetroConnect as a micro-transit provider. So first and foremost, every zone, all 11 zones are ADA accessible, right. Every zone is supported by at least one chair accessible vehicle from the start of service to the end of service, no exceptions. You're a wheelchair rider, the vans will pick you up directly in front of where you are and drop you off exactly where you need to be with support from our professional drivers. In addition to that, MetroConnect Via the county offers arguably what we believe is the most innovative micro-transit platform available. This is one that powers ten autonomous vehicles services across the globe, and currently here in Miami, there are actually two autonomous vehicles micro-transit specific zones that run up to ten vehicles at a time. So that actually makes Miami home to the largest on-demand AV public micro-transit fleet in the U.S. So, the county is really doing some innovative things. And then finally, I want to call out one of our other differentiators which is new in 2024, is the Via Uber partnership, worked quite a bit with my colleague Geo Castro over here, to be launching this in the upcoming months. And this joint effort is going to offer some pretty unique things, pretty innovative things on the MetroConnect platform. So, alongside Uber rides, you'll have micro-transit rides that offer flexibility to residents and visitors; and so, leveraging Uber scale, flexibility and algorithm alongside our innovative platform, we're able to expand Via access at peak times, really tricky commuter times, reduce the cost per passenger, and drive down wait times for the service as well. So, what this allows Metro-Connect to do as a platform is give your residents, give your visitors, give your shoppers more flexibility, more reach when offering them transit in and around Coral Gables. And then just one other key feature to call out is something that we're really proud of at MetroConnect is this integrated transit feature, right. So, we offer micro-transit in Coral Gables, we're going to be offering Uber here in Coral Gables, but we will also offer integrated transit which ties all of our riders together across the entire system, right. So, this technology allows us to put our fixed routes, including potentially the Coral Gables trolleys onto this platform. So, I, as a rider have the ability to see MetroConnect, fixture out, trolleys, and Uber in one convenient very simple rider app that allows me to navigate the community very easily. So, what are we doing here in Coral Gables? Let's take a closer look. So, the original iteration, I'm going to call out a few specific things on the map here. The original iteration just barely touched Coral Gables and in the southeast portion. We expanded, in partnership with the county, as of October 1st, and we now cover much more of Coral Gables. So, the map that you see here, and if anyone has seen these vans, you might see them floating around

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from time to time, but what you see here in orange of course, the city limits of Coral Gables, and then the two Dadelands. We kind of consider them one zone, because riders can ride across them into and from Coral Gables, Dadeland North and Dadeland South. So, like we've seen elsewhere, the service has been really popular, it's thriving, its growing, riders are excited to get on the platform and move around your city. Since the October 1st expansions, we've seen some pretty impressive rider stats. So, across the two zones, we're doing over 4,000 rides a month, and that continues to grow week to week. A typical average wait time of 14 minutes, which we expect to improve as we bring more vehicles online and then launch the Uber partnership as well, specifically Dadeland North which encompasses maybe 40 percent of the city thus far, its growing really quickly. Since we've launched, we've seen a 52 percent increase there. And then one thing I want to call in particular is, if you can see it, in the northeast corner of the Blue Zone, Dadeland North, we are bringing riders to and from your business district already. You are seeing ridership in and out of there on the MetroConnect platform, without any marketing, any highlighting of your business district on the platform whatsoever. So, while the service is doing great as is, we think there's an opportunity to serve Coral Gables even better, right. So, following the Cutler Bay model, we are spreading the word that cities can leverage the existing program, the existing operational and tech footprint and partner with MetroConnect and buying into the service, right, and we think, and we see other cities funding micro-transit services, we think that these cities would benefit greatly from leveraging what is already there and building off that strong footprint of service, and then amplifying their service, all of their transit services even further, because we've seen it work well in Cutler Bay. So here in red, and I'll explain kind of the components of our proposal here, but here in red you see our current micro-transit provider, you see that actual kind of an overlap between those services as is, and we think given what you're doing currently, there's an ability, there's the opportunity to reinvest those current funds into the service and drive efficiency even further. So, what would this partnership potentially look like? There's three main parts and we think they'd be quite effective in bringing more residents in and around your business district and the rest of Coral Gables. So, the first part of the proposal would be to expand and offer on-demand service to more of the city, more of the city limits, cover potentially residential areas in the north, highlight the business district downtown, and really bring shoppers and residents into those areas. Second, we would deploy vehicles dedicated solely to Coral Gables, which would mean much shorter wait times for your riders and an excellent rider experience, so riders have a very predictable, easy to use service; and then finally, not only would we offer Uber just out of the box for your residents and visitors, we would also have the ability to show the Coral Gables trolleys in there as well. So, we could potentially even increase ridership on your excellent strong Coral Gables trolley system as it operates today. And that's a reality, that's something that we can do today, this third part of the partnership, right. In talking with your transit team, we can pump in those Coral trolley live feeds to offer those rides directly in the MetroConnect app for your residents as is. So really, it goes back to just offering a clean, simple, unified rider experience that senior residents can use, visitors can use, folks who want to go out and about for dining and shopping can use, and just making it simple, and we believe that we're building that platform here on MetroConnect. So, what would the impact be? We think your city would see immediately improved transit services. While we do not have your city's data necessarily, I'm happy to take a look at it, we ran a transition impact analysis for a neighboring city, based on their current provider and here's what we found. So, that city by joining the program, we commented that they would see not only a safer more comfortable rider experience for folks trying to move around their city,

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but they could also expect a higher quality of service with much shorter wait times for their rides. That's a quick, predictable, comfortable, safe service on the MetroConnect platform. And then additionally, their expected ridership would increase significantly as well as the overall reach of their service. So, they are accessing more people, and they are bringing more people into their downtown area by potentially joining the MetroConnect program. So, what does this all mean? Joining the MetroConnect program, we believe this city would bring in more shoppers, residents, riders to the downtown area, and do so even more quickly than they ever have before. But what really brings MetroConnect together is, I believe, our local team. We have an excellent, dedicated local team that is very hands on with our partners, both at the county and city levels and community levels. We would work with the City of Coral Gables a tailored marketing and economic development plans that would really focus on driving ridership into your downtown business district and make it easy for residents to know that this is an option. And so, our community engagement team, which is often out and about, and our other local teams would get on the ground, deliver hands-on rider support, be it the community center, senior center, as well as business support throughout the city. So, when you step back and we look at all these factors together, via innovative technology, the strength of the MetroConnect program, the existing footprint, we really believe that a partnership between MetroConnect and Coral Gables would be the best service available, would deliver the best service available for your residents and visitors. It will allow them to move in and out and around Coral Gables quickly and comfortably, also being very cost-effective for the city and we would welcome any opportunity to speak further about it and then happy to field any questions. Before I do that very quickly, just one PSA for the Commission here, we'd love to meet your residents as well. So just a few weeks ago, myself and our community engagement team were at a senior center hosting a bilingual educational session for 20-plus senior residents, we helped them download the app, we got them connected with the phone line, which they can pick up and call for rides, then actually showed them the wheelchair accessible vehicles and other vehicles in that service. If you're interested in having our team, come speak to your communities, we would love to do that. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Commissioner.

Commissioner Menendez: Thank you for presenting. We met in my office a couple of weeks ago, and the part of our discussion which I thought was important and interesting was the one that focuses on our seniors and those that are disabled, because we have a significant senior population of which I think I now qualify, and my question, because I just want to break down some of the data that you provided, when you showed the numbers, what cities were you using to come up with the numbers that you were showing the increases. Is it particular cities or is it countywide.

Mr. Loria: So that was a specific city neighboring Coral Gables, so its very close comp in terms of ridership, demographics, urban layout, it's very similar neighbor in Coral Gables.

Commissioner Menendez: Right. Do any of my colleagues have any questions?

Vice Mayor Anderson: I have a few questions. You had some bullet points, one of them was cost per ride comparison. What did you compare with?

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Mr. Loria: Cost per ride comparison.

Vice Mayor Anderson: You said, your presentation indicated it was a cheaper cost per ride, cheaper than what?

Mr. Loria: So, typically what we do is when we analyze cost per ride, we'll look at other on-demand providers and here in the Miami market there are certain competitors that we work with, and we can take a look at their data times to look at those cost per rides matrix. Here in Miami, specifically, we take a look at cost per ride based on the zone. So, this is based on some of the data that we have previously been provided. In terms of a specific analysis for the City of Coral Gables that's something that we'll be able to look at specifically. So, I can't speak to your data exactly. I can speak to similar services.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So, you will need to get back to us as to the cost per ride analysis as to the current services that the City of Coral Gables provides to its residents. When you are talking about a phone number for an individual to call for a ride, they have to register ahead of time.

Mr. Loria: So that's a great question. So how it works is, if someone doesn't have a smartphone or isn't wanting to use a smartphone, they are able to call our MetroConnect line and the agent on the line will help them set up an account and then from there on out, once they have that account set up over the phone, all they have to do is say, hey, this is my name, I'd like to go from A to B, and the agent coordinates that ride for them and will let them know when the ride is there.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So, I'm assuming, number one, this is funded by the city.

Mr. Loria: Excuse me.

Vice Mayor Anderson: This is funded by the city as opposed to being paid for by the resident individually.

Mr. Loria: So, the current service is county funded. There is a city that has purchased into the model to fund a portion of their city services. They use their local CITT funds to do that specifically. So, I think the benefit of this is that there's already a really strong presence that touches a lot of Coral Gables, but if you're interested in expanding that presence you have a leaping point to work off of to provide more service at a cost-effective point for the rest of your residents.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So, our residents right now could call the 786-321-5842 number and get service.

Mr. Loria: As long as they are within one of our MetroConnect zones, the Dadeland North zone, correct.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Okay. What is the lead time for getting a ride?

Mr. Loria: So, it depends on the zone. Here in Dadeland North, it's a new zone, it's about three months old. Typically, we see them stabilize anywhere from six to eight months. Right now, it's 14 minutes. We expect that to improve with our Uber partnership coming in online, more vehicles potentially coming in online, and the service kind of reaching a stability point, so 14 minutes or less.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I look forward to seeing more data from you all for cost per ride perspective in the future.

Mr. Loria: Absolutely. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: So first off, thank you for being here. When we met, we had discussed the relationship with Uber and the possibilities of offering as much ridership and engagement with the residents here. So, I have the same questions as the Vice Mayor and when you have that information, cost, along with lead times, that's what really, I'm focused in on.

Mr. Loria: Yes.

Mayor Lago: I'd like to understand how the city can save money, but also not compromise on service, actually have better service. The lead times are an issue right now, and again, safety, ensuring safety as much as possible. So, when do you think that you can have this data for us, so we can get a little bit better idea.

Mr. Loria: So, in terms of comparison, of course, we need to see your current service provider's data and we're happy to take a look at that and kind of do a provider-to-provider comparison. I can turn something around like cost per ride, kind of impact of a service amplification.

Mayor Lago: But even without having engaged Uber.

Mr. Loria: Sorry.

Mayor Lago: Isn't part of the plan to engage Uber and to reduce costs further.

Mr. Loria: Exactly. Yes. That's exactly the plan. So, all the data I gave you here is without the Uber consideration. So, once we layer on Uber, and potentially trolleys, we can take a look at what those ETAs.

Mayor Lago: That's what I want.

Mr. Loria: Yes, happy to do so. Yes. We can turn that around in a week or two. I need to work with Geo and his team to get you projections like that.

Mayor Lago: Could I ask my colleagues on the Commission, I don't want to step on your toes.

Commissioner Menendez: No, no. The Clerk informed me that there's one member of the community that would like to speak, if that's okay.

Mayor Lago: Perfect.

Commissioner Menendez: I'm sure it's not the very nice people with the T-shirts. Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: So, it's Benjamin Flinn. I'll ask him to speak on Zoom.

Commissioner Menendez: On Zoom. Okay.

Mr. Flinn: Hi, I'm a resident right next to Highway 1, close to the University. And I just want to say that this is really, this whole MetroConnect idea is really solving an accessibility issue. For me personally, why I would use a service like MetroConnect is because I don't feel entirely safe, you know, crossing Highway 1, or biking to sort of Miracle Mile and those areas. So, I think the city should not be pouring money into a solution like this, rather they should be focusing on better bike and pedestrian infrastructure. I think in terms of longevity that that would be the better plan. Coral Gables entirely, the distance of it is definitely a bikeable distance. Even if you consider things like our senior members of the community, I think just expanding better bus service would be a better option. That's all I have to say. Thank you.

Commissioner Menendez: Thank you very much. Mayor go ahead.

Mayor Lago: I had met with both of them and obviously, I wanted to hear more about the options, so when you put it on the agenda...

Commissioner Menendez: Yes, we can bring it, I think members of the Commission would want to know more about the numbers and the cost, so that we can coordinate, and you can come back and further discuss the numbers, so everybody here gets a better grasp and understanding. So, just to get it right. So, there's a service that's provided without Uber and then a service that's provided with Uber as an extra layer, is that correct?

Mr. Loria: So, currently the service operates without Uber, but we are launching that functionality in the first half of this year. So, what that means to your residents is that they will be on MetroConnect, and they will see MetroConnect rides and Uber rides. We're really not, there's not a differentiation between the two. It's a platform that is trying to poll together many different types of transit and just make that experience seamless for riders.

Commissioner Menendez: No disrespect for Uber but going forward are you limited to one company, or will you expand because you mentioned trolley, you mentioned this, and is it going to stay a narrow window of options or will it grow in time.

Mr. Loria: So, my understanding of the plan is to offer programmatic of options under a platform like this, so it would have Uber, Lyft, trolleys...Trolleys and...are already on there, we're going to get on the rider app, but yes, think of it as an expansive program that allows multiple transit

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providers to provide the best rides via wheelchair accessible, like our transit, Uber, bikes, or other accessible transit options, on one platform.

Geo: And what we've seen from local jurisdictions is the need for an on-demand solution, kind of an overflow to a certain degree and that's why we're partnering with MetroConnect on their zones along the Metrorail, we're both brought on, on the Better Bus Network Project with the county to kind of take over some of the routes that were discontinued as well. So, our expansion there made sure that residents could go to the new routes and not be, kind of have a transportation desert that they used to have with the bus route. So, with Uber and MetroConnect, and Via together, kind of guarantees low wait times, solutions that kind of have the decorated cars with the wave accessible para-transit vehicles as well and the cost saver. You know if you expand a micro-transit service with Uber and nobody uses it, the city pays us nothing. There isn't an overhead cost for that.

Commissioner Menendez: Thank you. We'll coordinate, come back at a later time with the numbers that my colleagues asked for. Thank you so much for being here.

Mr. Loria: Thank you for the time, appreciate it.

Mayor Lago: Commissioner, if I may.

Commissioner Menendez: Yes, of course Mayor.

Mayor Lago: Since you put this on the agenda. I would like for the Manager, its your item, through the Commissioner, I'd like to see if we can get, we can meet with these individuals within the next two weeks, if you could have the Commissioner meet with you and these individuals within the next two weeks to be able to prepare the requested information, get all that information and bring it back under Commissioner Menendez and present it as an opportunity here in the city.

City Manager Iglesias: I have no issue, Mayor.

Mayor Lago: I do remember, like two or three meetings ago, I had put Uber on the agenda, and I had deferred it as a result of multiple different issues. So, I think this is a really interesting opportunity using infrastructure that you don't have to pay for, and it could be a cost-savings for the city.

City Manager Iglesias: I have it in my notes to set up that meeting with Commissioner Menendez.

Mayor Lago: Perfect.

City Manager Iglesias: If that's okay with you, Commissioner.

Commissioner Menendez: Yes, that's fine.

Mayor Lago: Anything else for the good of the order on this item? Thank you very much.

