



From the desk of  
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 Fort Lauderdale City Commissioner • District II

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## \$250,000 a day

### Fort Lauderdale spends millions to truck sewage amid massive infrastructure crisis

The tragic tale of Fort Lauderdale's infrastructure crisis keeps getting worse.

We recently learned the city has spent \$12 million over the past five months trucking sewage from one manhole to another because the main sewer line through downtown has collapsed. The city is paying private contractors to run some 40 sewage trucks round-the-clock.

The tab of this endeavor reached \$250,000 a day in the aftermath of Hurricane Irma. What a waste of city money when this easily could have been avoided if our administration had properly budgeted and maintained our infrastructure.

\$250,000 a day. That's about how much money the city will collect in property taxes this year from 138 homeowners based on the average value of a single-family house.

Think of all the ways the city could better spend that amount of money.

More police officers, homes for the homeless, or road improvements perhaps. I was appalled this month to hear city staff tell residents of Coconut Isle Drive that we can't fix their cracked and crumbling street because we don't have enough money in our road repair budget. How much would it cost? About \$200,000, less than one day of sewage hauling.

Unfortunately, the trucking is a necessity right now. Without it, more old pipes would break under stress and more sewage would spill into our streets and yards. Already, 20 million gallons have polluted our yards and waterways!

Our city manager says he finally has a plan to fix our water and sewer infrastructure. It's called *Go Big, Go Fast*. It really should be called *Too Little, Too Late*. Our expert consultants say the city underfunded important maintenance work for the past decade and estimate more than \$600 million in work is needed over the next five years.

Much of the city manager's plan is a mystery.

He asked the City Commission for permission to borrow \$200 million next spring, but provided no details on how he plans to spend the money. When our blue-ribbon Infrastructure Task Force sought that information, a top public works official walked out of the meeting rather than answer.

Although the rest of the commission voted to allow the city manager to move forward, I did not. I could not borrow money without knowing how we are going to spend it first.

What we need is a solid plan that lays out in detail what work is needed and how it will be paid for.

Part of that plan must be to stop raiding our utility accounts to balance the city budget. The city manager has been siphoning \$20 million a year from the utilities. Another part of the plan must be to temper the current pace of development until our infrastructure is repaired. Residents have been demanding this, but few in City Hall have been listening.

#### **The Wave streetcar**

Another important issue that we must address is the proposed Wave streetcar.

The Florida Department of Transportation recently opened construction bids, and they were nearly double the original estimate. The total cost would be more than \$270 million for the 2.8-mile downtown loop. That's almost \$100 million per mile. On top of that, Broward County suddenly ruled out extending the streetcar to the airport.

Enough is enough.

As public criticism of the project mounted in recent months, city staff repeatedly told us that it was too late to stop the Wave. I've learned this is simply not true. The Wave can be stopped, and it's time to put an end to this.

Here's how it can be done. The contracts between the state, county and city allow FDOT to cancel the Wave if it determines the project to be "improbable and infeasible." The county and FDOT also have the right to terminate the project if the cost greatly exceeds their earlier estimate.

The Wave is 19th century technology that relies on overhead wires and tracks in the roadway. There are systems around the world that are wireless and trackless, that don't require drivers and that run entirely on batteries. Also, the Wave was never intended to solve traffic congestion. It was envisioned as a way to boost development downtown. Finally, it's really a train to nowhere. I don't know many who need to travel from City Hall to the hospital.

A recent report by the Cato Institute contains many warnings about pursuing projects like the Wave. Transit ridership is facing steep declines nationally with the rise of ride-hailing services like Uber and Lyft. The institute also said streetcars actually increase road congestion as most people will continue to drive.

Under my questioning at a recent City Commission meeting, staff revealed a critical piece of information that will be a relief to many.

There has been concern if we could refund the assessment money collected from downtown residents to pay for the Wave. We learned this money is sitting untouched in a bank account and we should be able to return it if the Wave is canceled.

Regarding both the Wave and our infrastructure crisis, I'd urge everyone to make their opinions known to city officials. If we work together, we can bring about needed change.

Sincerely,







Commissioner Trantalis helps Commissioner Romney Rogers turn on the holiday lights at the annual Light Up Lauderdale event at Esplanade Park.



Commissioner Trantalis greets veterans at the city's annual Veterans Day ceremony at the Sandy Nininger statue on the Riverwalk.



Commissioner Trantalis presents Fort Lauderdale's Citizen of the Year award to Mary Fertig, a leader of the Idlewyld neighborhood and the Lauderdale Tomorrow group.



Commissioner Trantalis helps open the new dock on the Middle River in the Middle River Terrace neighborhood on Halloween.



Commissioner Trantalis joins other officials in opening the new Rooftop restaurant in the KO office building in downtown Fort Lauderdale.



Commissioner Trantalis joins other officials in the project of painting art on the exterior of the old One Stop Shop building during Make a Difference Day.