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Advocates: Price, time is right for parkway

Parkway price makes sense, they contend

*BY RICK NEALE
FLORIDA TODAY*

Cost estimates to build the long-discussed St. Johns Heritage Parkway have plummeted in recent months, thanks to tumbling construction costs.

Last year, Brevard County officials publicly discussed prices ranging up to \$200 million for the highway, plus \$60 million to \$80 million for two Interstate 95 interchanges.

Now?

"It's going to be about \$120 million for the whole project -- including the interchanges," said Tres Holton, a Palm Bay consultant promoting the project.

Holton pegged potential costs for the initial parkway segment -- linking Malabar and Ellis roads -- at \$54 million (with an interstate overpass) to \$69 million (with an interchange).

Last week, Holton and Dave Isnardi, chief legislative aide to Brevard County Commissioner Andy Anderson, spent three days in Washington, D.C., lobbying for road funding.

The duo met with about 20 members of Congress or their staffers, Holton said. Included was a 40-minute joint session with U.S. Reps. Bill Posey, R-Rockledge and John Mica of Winter Park, the ranking Republican on the House transportation and infrastructure committee.

They also met with House members Susanne Kosmas, D-New Smyrna Beach, and Connie Mack IV, R-Fort Myers.

Isnardi said he emphasized the future road's significance as an evacuation route, citing hurricanes and the 2008 Mother's Day fires that burned about 4,000 acres in southern Brevard.

"We had citizens trapped in their homes last year," Isnardi said of those wind-whipped firestorms. "We got everybody to understand what the parkway is and why we're building it."

Brevard officials hope the upcoming federal transportation reauthorization bill includes funding for the parkway. The county, Melbourne and Palm Bay submitted three requests totaling more than \$77 million.

The fate of these requests remains unknown. Holton said fiery debate over President Barack Obama's health care reforms will probably postpone the bill into next year.

The Obama administration favors an 18-month delay, saying lawmakers need that much time to resolve issues such as whether to raise fuel taxes or find some other means to fund transportation programs.

Since April 2005, various governmental jurisdictions have approved at least \$30 million for the project, according to Holton's research.

Chief among them: the Brevard County Commission's pledge of \$21 million in local option gas tax bonds in May 2007 for right-of-way acquisition, engineering and design.

After design and land purchases are completed, permits must be secured. Holton hopes construction begins by early 2011.

Holton was hired by Friends of the Parkway, an ad hoc organization of Space Coast landowners, business leaders and other officials.

A former Palm Bay deputy mayor, Holton lost in the Republican primary in the Florida House District 30 race last fall.

Isnardi went to Washington on personal time, Anderson said, and his trip was not financed using county funds.

Information from Gannett Washington Bureau was used in this report. Contact Neale at 242-3638 or rneale@floridatoday.com.
