

Dealing for St. Johns Heritage Parkway



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The most ambitious road-building project for Brevard County in decades so far has little of the right-of-way needed and less than one-fifth of the money to build it.

Yet, construction of the first phase of the St. Johns Heritage Parkway around Palm Bay could begin by this time next year if the county can strike deals for enough parcels of land along a first phase of the route. Officials just landed the first state earmarks for construction, money they hope can be leveraged to attract still more Congressional earmarks.

While pitching a congestion-easing highway for commuters, leaders from the city of Palm Bay and Brevard County government continue to negotiate with developers and landowners in their jurisdictions.

"It's like eating an elephant," said John Denninghoff, the county's traffic planning engineer and chief right of way negotiator. "You eat it one bite at a time."

A FLORIDA TODAY review of the project found that getting the deals done has meant reshaping the future roadway from a free-flowing beltway around southern and western Palm Bay to an artery with developer-pleasing stoplights and intersections. The roadway's financial benefits to landowners along the proposed route are great enough that one has hired his own lobbyist to promote the roadway and secure federal and state dollars for the project.

Meanwhile, taxpayers and commuters throughout Brevard County will be affected by the project's impact on other road budgets. The parkway now ranks as the Space Coast Transportation Planning Organization's No. 1 funding priority. At \$200 million, the parkway could consume much of the money Brevard receives from taxes, grants and federal earmarks for years to come -- money that otherwise would be spent on roads elsewhere.

Adding to the challenge, city and county leaders so far have rejected the idea of opening the parkway as a toll road. That approach paid for the Pineda Causeway between 1971-1989 and

the Beachline Expressway through Brevard from 1963-1998.

Officials are gambling that once they start the project, the money to finish it will come. Supporters say it will benefit the public with better roads, less congestion, new development and more tax revenue for the county and cities of Palm Bay, Melbourne and West Melbourne.

"Their payback is access . . . however that property gets developed," Palm Bay Councilman Milo Zonka said. "The parkway's payback is those houses will pay impact fees, which then can be used to kick a two-lane into a four-lane. It's almost like you need a spark to start the process, and then it's self-fulfilling. Access creates development, which then creates more access."

All but one county commissioner supports the parkway project.

"I can't justify spending money on a new road when we don't have revenue to maintain our current roads," Commissioner Robin Fisher of Titusville said.

Dealing for land

The parkway has appeared on county planners' priority list for at least 15 years. It moved to the top recently after the county launched other urgent projects including the Pineda Causeway Extension, the realignment of Ellis Road and the extension of Apollo Boulevard. The parkway is the only new highway on the project list.

It is as ambitious as anything ever planned in Brevard: 21 miles of highway along the western edge of southern Brevard County and connected at two interchanges to Interstate 95 -- one at Ellis Road near Melbourne and the other near Micco Road south of Palm Bay.

The complexity of the project and a scarcity of money forced city and county planners to focus on an initial, manageable phase of the project. That 6.5-mile stretch connects the west end of Malabar Road near Heritage High School to U.S. 192 just west of Interstate 95. That will ease some congestion and provide a route out of northwest Palm Bay in the event of fires or floods, supporters say.

"We would like to get the roadway from Malabar to U.S. 192 built as soon as we could," said

Space Coast TPO Director Bob Kamm.

Palm Bay officials expect to begin construction on their portion next year. The county would break ground on its portion in 2012.

Simply connecting Malabar to Emerson, the initial city segment, would provide relief for commuters in western Palm Bay, regardless of when the county starts its portion, Deputy City Manager Sue Hann said.

"The pattern now is that everyone goes east in the morning," she said.

Private benefits

The promise for landowners: Access to a major thoroughfare for new homes and businesses. Parts of cow pastures will become prime commercial property at intersections spaced at one-mile intervals between U.S. 192 and Malabar Road.

"People were supposed to be able to zip through to Palm Bay," Commissioner Fisher said. "This gives them four corners to sell off and make a profit."

Among the owners who seems to understand the economic benefits is William "Tuck" Ferrell, scion of a ranching family that once ranked among Brevard's largest property holders. His acreage lies just south of U.S. 192.

A former West Melbourne planning and zoning board member, Ferrell has become one of the parkway's biggest promoters. Ferrell hired Tres Holton, a former Palm Bay councilman and Brevard County commissioner's aide, as a personal public relations consultant and to lobby for money for the project in Tallahassee and Washington.

An affable man who often wears a straw cowboy hat, Ferrell was born in Virginia but spent most of his life in Brevard, riding horses, raising cattle, and listening to former County Commissioner Joe Wickham explain his vision for an interconnected road system. Ferrell's family has donated undeveloped parcels to help build the Pineda Causeway extension and Apollo Boulevard, among other projects.

For now, the land he envisions as part of the parkway is home to about 180 head of cattle, he said.

Ferrell says he only wants better roads. But his negotiations with county transportation engineers for right of way through his 286 acres indicate he plans an "urban village" on his land. It would include a mix of homes, businesses and a hotel. Ferrell hopes to secure plans for an intersection on his property.

Ferrell attends nearly every local TPO meeting, and can often be spotted at county and city meetings where the parkway is discussed.

"Nobody wants to come to a county that has a road system with lack of connectivity," Ferrell said. "People want a viable transportation system, bring jobs to the county."

Parkway deals also can bring side benefits to landowners. For example, the county's contract with the Platts calls for taxpayers to buy fill dirt from the owners at fair market value. Growth plans for the Platt property, which sprawls over 8,193 acres, call for up to three intersections to serve 4,670 homes and a mix of business and industry.

"Each one of those intersections gives the Platts four corners to sell off and make a profit," Commissioner Fisher said.

Making progress

To start the first phase, the county still must acquire a hodgepodge of parcels between western Palm Bay and I-95 west of Melbourne.

Today, the four key parcels between the Platt land and U.S. 192 are dotted with scrub, palms and cattle. They include a failed development now in foreclosure and another parcel owned by a member of the Platt family. The county also is negotiating with two owners between 192 and the proposed Ellis Road interchange who had planned to develop their wetland-dotted properties into subdivisions and an RV park.

"We have had verbal offers to donate," Kamm said.

Denninghoff, the county's land acquisitions expert, said it takes patience to deal with landowners seeking best value for their money in a depressed real estate market. Some would rather wait to sell until prices rebound. Recently, the county approved a contract for five acres from a failed development north of the Platt Ranch.

Denninghoff is still negotiating with Ferrell and Walter "Toby" Platt for enough parkway land to reach U.S. 192 from the south. He also is talking with owners of a planned 195-home subdivision and the owner of the Spring Lake RV Resort for the northern stretch between U.S. 192 to the proposed I-95 interchange at Ellis Road.

Lobbying for money

Still, the project remains far short of the money needed for completion. Local taxes won't cover it, and the idea of a toll road has gained no traction. As they have in years past, officials are counting on lobbyists to win state and federal road money.

Palm Bay has secured \$5 million in federal earmarks and will receive a \$4 million earmark from the state Legislature in this year's budget.

Local leaders have appealed to Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Orlando, and Rep. Bill Posey, R-Rockledge, in hopes of securing more federal dollars over the next 18 months. However, Posey -- who represents the area -- has joined a House Republican ban on earmarks for the 2011 budget and has requested none.

The federal government could help most with the two interchanges at I-95. Design alone will cost \$3.5 million for the south interchange at Micco Road and \$2.5 million for the north interchange at Ellis. Building them would cost \$25 million each.

It's important to complete federal planning requirements, Kamm said, "so we're in a position to get earmarked money cleanly."

Parkway leaders hope to close much of the gap through contributions from real estate interests.

"Half or more could be from the private sector," Kamm said.

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