

Palm Bay parkway finally progressing

Written by

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PALM BAY — Annemarie Burrows laughs when she says some of her neighbors weren't sure they'd be alive to see a long-talked-about parkway looping around Palm Bay and linking it with Melbourne and West Melbourne.

If all goes well, Burrows, 76, will attend a fall groundbreaking for the first portion of the St. Johns Heritage Parkway, a stretch extending from Malabar Road to Emerson Drive. When completed, the parkway would skirt the western edge of South Brevard.

For almost 20 years, residents and city and county officials have heard about and pursued **funding** and plans for the regional corridor, called Palm Bay Parkway within the city. Despite economy and acquisition-based delays, it's highly anticipated, not only as an alternative evacuation route, but also one that will ease congestion on Emerson Drive by providing another commuter route.

With the help of \$4 million in federal funding available after July 1, city officials say that can start to happen. This year, with assistance of the Space Coast Transportation Planning **Organization**, Palm Bay officials secured that funding, making it

possible to stretch the project to Emerson, said Sue Hann, city manager.

The original state grant for the project and city resources -- including transportation impact fees -- were sufficient to build the parkway only from Malabar to Pace Drive, Hann said.

Eventually, the parkway will extend to Palm Bay's northern limits, hooking up with a county-built section that will link to U.S. 192 and then to a new interchange at Ellis Road. Burrows said safety is just as much a concern as convenience for parkway supporters.

"One of the biggest things, when this first started, was wanting another way out of here in an emergency," said Burrows, an 18-year West Pine Estates resident who has spoken many times about parkway plans at County **Commission** and other meetings.

"Emerson Drive is our main way out in an emergency. . . . This would get us out of

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here a lot faster and easier," Burrows said. "When one of the canals washed out years ago, it's like we were trapped."

Hann said that to use the latest round of funds, the city must execute an agreement with the Florida Department of Transportation, which administers federal transportation funds, and **prepare** the project to meet federal standards.

The Malabar-to-Emerson work is expected to take about 15 months.

Elia Twigg of the city's Public Works Department is the new project manager for the job. She's getting familiar with construction plans and finalizing loose ends, including bid documents and getting right-of-way certification. The project will be competitively bid and a contractor selected at that time.

"There should be minimal inconveniences for residents while the construction is taking place since the construction will be in an area that is currently not developed," Twigg said.

"The only inconvenience I foresee will be where the parkway intersects with Malabar Road. . . . The inconvenience will be minimal, and it is anticipated traffic will still flow with little impedance during those intersection improvements."

After the Malabar-to-Emerson portion of the parkway puzzle is completed, the second-highest priority will be supporting Brevard County in making the full

connection to U.S. 192, Hann said.

Construction of two interchanges, located just north of Micco Road and in Melbourne as an extension of Ellis Road,"will be top priorities for advocating for transportation money," she said.

"From a construction standpoint, the Palm Bay portion will provide immediate relief and comes first," Hann added.

Bob Kamm, executive director of the Space Coast TPO, said the county is "actively involved in acquiring the right of way to go all the way to the Ellis interchange." Those interchanges are not yet funded or in the design stage, he said.

In Melbourne, City Manager Jack Schluckebier said the city is working on funding for the upgrade of the interchange area and has had some **success** with grants. The years-long process takes "a lot of time and effort, but it's moving forward," he said.

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The transportation impact of the parkway is powerful, Hann said. It also could invite commercial activity, she said, "so if residents want to go to a **grocerystore**, they don't have to come all the way to the east."

Burrows said that while the initial construction is "only a start, eventually it will happen."

"We've had a few people over the years say they didn't think they'd see this in their lifetime," she said. "I said, 'Then, let's fight for it for the next generation.' You have to think ahead. Every generation should help the next in one way or another."

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