

Parkway's access divides officials

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Commission to decide whether planned road will be growth hazard

By Rachael Lee Coleman

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VIERA -- A controversial decision to allow landowners access to the Palm Bay Parkway, the most anticipated and largest-planned road project in South Brevard, rests in the hands of one county commissioner.

The parkway, a planned high-speed road linking Malabar Road in Palm Bay to Ellis Road near West Melbourne, aims to provide an alternative travel route to residents in northwest Palm Bay and relieve future congestion on the main north-south corridors. Yet, the road could spur the same sprawling development that Palm Bay and Brevard County leaders have battled for years if access to it is not limited.

That access issue, which has divided transportation, county and city officials and residents since the road's inception, also divided the votes of four Brevard County commissioners on Tuesday. Now Commissioner Truman Scarborough, who did not attend or cast a vote at the public hearing, must determine whether the parkway will be a growth hazard for Brevard.

The alignment recommended by the Brevard Metropolitan Planning Organization intersects Malabar Road, future extensions of Pace and Emerson drives, U.S. 192 and Ellis Road and can support 55-mph speeds for quick access to Melbourne.

Limiting parkway access to those public roads not only enables a speedy alternate route, which may become necessary during a disaster or hurricane, but also deters urban sprawl. If developers can't build driveways that access the road, they will have no incentive to build there.

Allowing developers and property owners "controlled access" to the parkway, however, would spur new development, reduce the speed limit on the road and could spark political battles over who gets access and who doesn't. In essence, it could become another Wickham Road.

"Look around the state of Florida today and try to find roadways that have been built that have not become mechanisms of development," Commissioner Nancy Higgs said. "Controlled access is just going to make transportation problems worse."

Construction and right of way costs for a "controlled access" road are estimated at \$64 million, but a "limited access" road is expected to cost \$72 million because the Florida Department of Transportation would have to purchase access rights from property owners to prevent them from building driveways to the road.

The Palm Bay and West Melbourne city councils, which aren't putting any money into the project, and some residents support "controlled access" because they say the road could be built more quickly if it costs less.

Commissioners Jackie Colon and Ron Pritchard agreed and voted to allow "controlled access." Commissioners Nancy Higgs and Sue Carlson voted to allow "limited access," the smart-growth approach recommended by transportation engineers from Parsons Transportation Group in Orlando, who studied the project, county transportation planning and MPO director Bob Kamm and planning director Mel Scott.

They agree the \$8 million price difference isn't much when considering the long-term needs of South Brevard residents.

"You get what you pay for," Kamm said.

Transportation officials said they are counting on federal money to fund about 75 percent of the project. Since they still haven't received any funding, construction dates are not set. Thus, planners said they don't know whether the higher cost of "limited access" would delay construction.

Kamm suggested building the parkway in three stages, beginning with the middle leg from Emerson Drive to U.S. 192, to spread costs and expedite construction.

"We should set the bar high," he said. "Then, if we have to, we can go back and allow access down the road. Once you grant controlled access, you can't take it back."

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