

New interchanges considered

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PALM BAY -- Margaret and Dennis Conaway have put off home improvements, fearing their Lamplighter Village home stood in the way of a proposed Interstate 95 interchange at Ellis Road.

"We thought we might have to pick up and go, so why put money into this place?" said Margaret Conaway, a retired social worker.

Their home sits in the 650-space mobile home park that abuts five acres approved for purchase as part of the proposed interchange project by Melbourne and the Melbourne Airport Authority.

"Nothing has been designed yet, but at least at the planning level we're doing everything possible to avoid Lamplighter Village," said Bob Kamm, executive director of the Brevard Metropolitan Planning Organization.

Local officials are moving ahead to prepare required justification reports for new I-95 interchanges between Micco and Grant Roads, in the southern end of the county, and Ellis Road in West Melbourne at the two ends of the proposed Palm Bay Parkway. That's the first step for Federal Highway Administration approval.

The interchanges are part of what may become a \$150 million to \$160 million new corridor through the county that could eventually run from south of Grant Road all the way to the Pineda Causeway. It includes the proposed Palm Bay Parkway with southern and northern extensions and connections to the two proposed I-95 interchanges.

The work to secure the interchanges finally is moving the Palm Bay Parkway project from concept to design and planning after more than 12 years.

Officials say it makes sense to add the interchanges while widening I-95. The state Department of Transportation plans a wider I-95 from Fort Pierce to the Georgia state line by 2020. Design of the local section is expected to begin in 2007.

The DOT is doing the justification study for an interchange at Oslo Road in Indian River County south of Brevard County. The DOT hasn't agreed to do the Brevard County study, but city and county staff hope to be reimbursed for at least some of the cost. Palm Bay will use some of its transportation impact fee funds for the southern access, while the Melbourne Airport Authority has discussed leading an interagency group to do the Ellis Road interchange study.

The cost of each study is about \$250,000 and would be followed by preliminary design and environmental studies.

"Putting in a new interchange is difficult. It's a long process," Kamm said. "Assuming everything goes well, it could take, maybe, four years."

He said the I-95 access is only part of a corridor that includes the Palm Bay Parkway, a southern extension and possibly a northern extension. John Denninghoff, county transportation engineer, said his office is seeking a consultant to begin designing the section from the Palm Bay city limit to U.S. 192 and Ellis Road.

Brevard commissioners have offered \$2.8 million from local option gas-tax funds for the parkway, and they are working to increase transportation impact fees to pay for the parkway and other needed projects.

While the total cost sounds daunting, Denninghoff said it's far less than the cost of widening Minton and Wickham

roads to six lanes or widening John Rodes Boulevard, which has roadside wetlands and deep ditches.

Minton Road widening to six lanes already is planned, he said, but even with that, traffic is expected to reach an "unacceptable level" in five to 10 years. He said the Palm Bay Parkway with extensions should keep traffic levels acceptable for 20 to 30 years.

"And, multiple corridors provide more increased capacity than just widening an existing roadway," Denninghoff said.

Melbourne International Airport officials hope the new corridor, which they've planned for several years, will provide greater access for passengers and freight.

Kamm said in addition to the southern extension of the parkway, county staff members are considering a northern extension that would go west of I-95 and use Washingtonia Drive to Pineda Avenue and beyond.

Such a large project requires the cooperation of Melbourne, West Melbourne and Palm Bay, the county, the airport, residents, state and federal officials and its local delegation.

"To wrestle an elephant, it takes more than one player," Kamm said.

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The process

Interchange Justification Reports are considered by the Federal Highway Administration, followed by environmental studies, preliminary designs, and, after approvals, funding and construction.

Estimated costs:

- Two new I-95 interchanges: \$40 million
- Main Palm Bay Parkway Route: Up to \$60 million
- Southern extension through Palm Bay: \$35 million
- Northern extension to Pineda: \$35 million

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