

Matt Reed: Parkway funded, closer to reality

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Our headliner today is Brevard County Commissioner Andy Anderson, who was just elected chairman.

The Republican from Palm Bay has been the political champion of the St. Johns Heritage Parkway.

So I questioned him about progress, funding and challenges with that roadway, designed to arc around northwest Palm Bay.

Question:What initiatives or projects do you plan to launch in the coming year?

Anderson: I've always been a big roads-and-bridges guy because I really think that's a fundamental for economic development. Obviously, you don't want someone coming in, looking to relocate a company, and driving over bad roads and potholes. We have some big initiatives going on that I've been working on with staff for six months to a year.

Q:Like what?

Anderson: Ellis Road — the widening and interchange. That's really important because you can show a company the logistics that they can leave the Melbourne airport and go right to I-95, and they're close to a port from that point. The airport has done very well attracting businesses, and this is going to put it into hyper drive.

To get that connected with the parkway that goes into Palm Bay, I think will be a real boost for the Melbourne area.

Q:So what is the status of the St. John's Parkway — or Palm Bay Parkway, as they call it in the city?

Anderson: Palm Bay has already broken ground. The county is moving forward. We have our money, we have our right-of-way acquisition done from U.S. 192 to Malabar Road. We have a couple more landowners we're negotiating with.

For me, it was never a whole project unless you can get the parkway connected to I-95. You obviously don't want to drop another 20,000 cars in the morning onto U.S. 192. A majority of working-class people in Palm Bay work in the Melbourne area. So for them to get from the west side to I-95, it's going to ease a lot of traffic on Minton Road and Palm Bay Road.

That's not the end game, though. Eventually, we want to get from the Ellis Road interchange north up to Viera. The Viera Co. years ago committed a portion of that. They call it the Washingtonia, which would go from Viera to Eau Gallie Boulevard. So we want to make sure that we're allocating enough money during this process to do right-of-way acquisition from Ellis Road to Eau Gallie.

The focus isn't on residential but is to open up the commercial corridors.

Q:Do you have the money?

Anderson: We're fully funded for the 192-to-Malabar portion. The remainder, to Ellis Road and I-95, we have a plan that's not out there yet, but will be. Hopefully, Florida and federal governments will advance their funds so we can get it done; hopefully before I leave office in four years.

Q:Why would the state or feds do that?

Anderson: One of the initiatives at the state level has been an economic development push and improving strategic infrastructure.

The governor has really pushed. He's been down here several times. I think we have his ear on that.

Q: You've got low labor and construction prices and cheap financing everywhere. Is now the time to start building, even if the economy hasn't fully recovered?

Anderson: All those things have made it affordable to build these projects, but I don't know how long it's gonna last.

Q: The governor was just here for the groundbreaking on Harris Corp.'s \$100 million engineering center in Palm Bay. What's the story behind that?

Anderson: That's a really good example of private-public partnerships: Palm Bay, the county and Harris working together.

I was talking to one of their vice presidents who heard from me during the whole "discussion" about their future. Virginia was making a big play to have that facility move there and had put a lot of cash on the table. And the joke was that I was standing on top of my Sarno Road office getting ready to jump if they didn't stay.

Because if you lose something like that, the writing was on the wall. The transition of employees out of Palm Bay to Virginia would have hurt Palm Bay. It would have been like a Detroit situation.

But Harris is creating a nice facility, with 150 new employees off the bat. It's a commitment to Brevard County that they're going to be here for a very long time.

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