

Palm Bay parkway expansion a highway to heaven

Scott Gunnerson, Brevard 12:16 a.m. EDT June 9, 2014



(Photo: For FLORIDA TODAY)

Rex Mullen faces a traffic ordeal whenever he ventures far from his home on the southern edge of Palm Bay.

"I have to go through about 15 lights to get up to the mall," said the 69-year-old Mullen, who lives in a Waterstone housing development off of Babcock Street.

He contends with traffic and other time-consuming delays just to reach Malabar Road and Interstate 95.

"If you go anywhere in the morning or late afternoon, there are about six school zones you have to go through on Babcock."

He hopes that will change when a section of the Palm Bay Parkway is built with an I-95 interchange halfway between Babcock Street and Micco Road.

The first phase of the project will connect the new interchange with Babcock Street, and another section that would link the interchange with Micco Road would be completed later when transportation planners determine it is necessary.

The complete four-mile project is estimated to cost \$101.8 million, according to the Florida Department of Transportation. Construction of the interchange could begin as early as the summer of 2016 and open in 2019.

FDOT will present plans at a public hearing for its project development and environment study at 5 p.m. Tuesday at Sunrise Elementary, 1651 Mara Loma Blvd. in Palm Bay.

The intersection will be a partial cloverleaf design, providing a loop for northbound vehicles to merge onto I-95.

The owners of 14 parcels of land plan to donate more than 180 acres of right-of-way valued at \$20.3 million for the project. However, there are no businesses or residences to relocate.

Transportation planners have drawn a corridor between Babcock Street and Micco Road that provided the shortest length and the least impact to wetlands and wildlife habitat, said Mary McGehee, FDOT project manager.

The project, which is near the Micco Scrub Sanctuary and Grant Flatwoods Sanctuary, will have an impact on about 24 acres of wetlands, a direct effect on the Florida scrub jay and potential direct effects on the eastern indigo snake and gopher tortoise, according to FDOT documents.

Although FDOT would prefer to build roads in a straight line, meandering roads will connect with the interchange to avoid environmentally sensitive areas.

"We had to work through this and try to minimize all these impacts," McGehee said. "There are a lot of scrub jay sanctuary property in this area. The tweaks and maneuvers go around these issues."

Transportation planners expect the new access to I-95 will encourage economic development in southern Brevard County and ease traffic congestion on local roads as well as the Malabar Road interchange.

Last year, more than 3,300 vehicles daily traveled along Babcock Street near Micco Road, while more than 7,000 used Babcock farther north near Grant Road.

In addition to relieving existing traffic congestion, there are also plans for community development, featuring a mixed-use downtown setting.

Palm Bay's Emerald City project would surround the interchange with 3,500 homes as well as retail shops, office buildings, medical facility and a business and technology park.

"We definitely have a transportation demand," McGehee said.

Mullen looks forward to the interchange and the completion of the Palm Bay Parkway, which will give him more choices.

"I'm not sure which way it is going to help us most, it depends on where we are going," Mullen said. "I think it will help the overall area and probably stimulate growth. That should help the economy."

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