

'Palm Bay Parkway' on road to becoming reality

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Mike Fazzalard of Mims helps clear a heavily wooded area at the end of Emerson Drive for the first leg of the long-awaited St. Johns Heritage Parkway. / CRAIG RUBADOUX/FLORIDA TODAY



PALM BAY PARKWAY

Boots and four-wheel drive vehicles are recommended for reaching this heavily wooded area that skirts the outer edges of northwest Palm Bay. But that's just for now.

In a matter of weeks, the area will start to transform into the St. John's Heritage Parkway, a road that for decades has been merely a dotted line on maps. Planners say the road will make vast improvements to traffic patterns across the south end of the county.

The first phase of construction will build the highway, known as Palm Bay Parkway within the city limits, from Malabar Road to Emerson Drive with access also at Pace

Drive.

But transportation officials agree that this \$12.1 million project is just a sign that the long-awaited parkway is finally moving from paper to reality.

"I think the fact that the Palm Bay city portion is moving into construction should tell the community that maybe it's slower than they wanted, but this thing is coming," said Bob Kamm, director of Space Coast Transportation Planning Organization.

Crews with Community Asphalt Corp. have been on site during the past two weeks, installing silt fencing and clearing wooded areas in preparation for construction, Palm Bay Public Works Director Elia Twigg said.

Once all permits are in place, crews will start construction at Pace Drive, then — section by section — connect the three roads. The work is scheduled to take about 18 months, with the new road expected to be ready by spring 2014.

"Everyone is very excited about it, because it's been talked about for so long and it's finally a reality," Twigg

said. "It's a huge improvement for the city."

A ceremonial groundbreaking scheduled for Oct. 15 is drawing excitement from not just Palm Bay, but from community leaders across South Brevard.

The parkway has been talked about since at least the 1980s. Current plans have it eventually wrapping around South Brevard, starting at a new Interstate 95 interchange proposed at Ellis Road near Melbourne and West Melbourne and ending at another new interchange near Palm Bay's southern city limits.

Individual segments of the parkway would impact different parts of south Brevard.

The interchange at Ellis Road, as well as expansion of that road, is expected to improve access not only to Melbourne International Airport, but also the global high-tech industrial hub surrounding it.

Located within five miles of the airport are businesses that employ more than 25,000 people in South Brevard.

"They deserve to have a facility that is easy to get to, that is attractive," Kamm said.

The direct access via Ellis Road will ease the traffic burden on both Eau Gallie Boulevard and U.S. 192, the two alternative routes motorists use to reach the airport and surrounding areas from I-95.

Likewise, transportation officials expect the parkway to lighten traffic on north-south corridors like I-95, Minton Road and Hollywood Boulevard.

The parkway's southern interchange will break up a 17-mile stretch — one of the longest on I-95 — between interstate exits.

"Its long-term benefits to the community can be quite obvious," Kamm said.

Connecting Malabar Road, as well as Pace and Emerson drives with the parkway should help alleviate traffic congestion in Palm Bay.

This section of the parkway will give residents primarily in southwest and northwest Palm Bay alternative ways to get to Pace and Emerson drives other than Minton Road, Twigg said. And once it extends to U.S. 192, the parkway will further improve traffic flow between Brevard's largest city and neighboring Melbourne and West Melbourne, she said.

While the Malabar-Pace-Emerson loop of the parkway is the first to reach construction, other sections are making progress.

The goal is to have plans and permits in place for Brevard County's section of the parkway, a 5.5-mile stretch from Palm Bay city limits to Ellis Road, complete by next spring, Public Works director John Denninghoff said.

Ultimately, funding for construction will determine when the county's portion of the road is built. The county is pursuing the limited grants available for new road construction, he said.

As it is now, the county's section of the parkway is officially one project. But Denninghoff said his staff is preparing the project so that it could be divided into two phases so the county could move forward with a portion of the road if money becomes available.

Meanwhile, Florida Department of Transportation approved funding the southern interchange construction in its five-year work plan as a part of a public-private partnership with developers of Emerald City, a proposed “green” community and activity center. It also selected firms to design both the Ellis Road and the southern interchanges.

“They’re all moving forward,” Kamm said. “All parts of it are moving forward.”

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