

Aug 28, 2002

Gandy Project Affects More Than Rattlers STEVE OTTO

Remember the voice in "Field of Dreams"?

There was that young farmer staring at his cornfield, when the voice whispers, "If you build it, he will come."

And it doesn't take the farmer long to figure out the voice is suggesting that if he builds a baseball field, "Shoeless" Joe Jackson and a bunch of other dead ballplayers will follow. The movie never says who the voice is, but you get the idea it's someone who can bring in an entire team of long-gone players.

Well, there's a voice down in south Tampa, and for a long time it has been whispering "We will build it because they are coming."

This voice, too, is from someone with almost absolute power - someone at the Florida Department of Transportation.

Instead of a baseball field in a cornfield, the voice would like to see a Gandy connector, some kind of elevated highway that would cost about a half-billion dollars and would change fundamentally the businesses and subdivisions along the stretch of Gandy Boulevard from the Gandy Bridge to the Lee Roy Selmon Expressway.

There is some question as to whether the connector should be built to handle a dramatic increase in traffic from Pinellas County or whether it's the connector itself that would increase the traffic.

That Golden Shore

It's probably some of both. When George Gandy opened up his toll bridge in 1924, the link was fairly dramatic. The St. Petersburg Chamber of Commerce gushed, "Two golden shores are now linked by a ribbon of silver."

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But development was still a few years off. It wasn't until the 1940s that a post office was built on Gandy Boulevard just west of West Shore Boulevard. And the sign that went up identified it as the Rattlesnake Post Office.

Rattlesnake was not just the name of the area; it described most of the residents. A cannery was established next to the post office so folks could pick up a tin or two of rattlesnake for supper.

That post office is long gone, and so are most of the snakes. Now, Gandy is lined with small businesses. But the Transportation Department seems determined to end all of that, too.

In a long and dragged-out proposal, the department calls for one of two options: an elevated expressway that would run just north of Gandy Boulevard in parallel fashion, or a bypass that would run just south of Gandy. Either proposal would disrupt businesses and relocate homeowners.

Many of those affected, and their local civic groups, have countered with a proposal to widen the existing Gandy to six lanes. But that doesn't satisfy the department, which has rejected that idea.

A Late Decision

Conveniently, a decision is expected sometime later this year, after the elections are over.

Not that it matters. The Senate Transportation Committee chairman is Jim Sebesta. The Republican represents that part of south Tampa, but his District 20 is rooted deeply in Pinellas, where the majority of his constituents live. Talk about a lousy bit of redistricting.

It may be that one of the state proposals would result in smoother traffic flow and significantly change that south Tampa neighborhood for the better.

But it's a decision that won't be made by the ones most affected. It won't be made by people who stand to lose homes or by business owners who'd be forced out. They aren't part of the Big Picture.

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They just happen to be the ones in the way.

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<http://www.tampatrib.com/FloridaMetro/columns/MGA8N0XME5D.html>

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