

Senator's plan: Enhance Gandy

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Abstract:

Gandy homeowners and business people cheered his plan but wondered if it would happen. Several options remain on the table, including a new one from the Tampa-Hillsborough County Expressway Authority that involves building a bridge down the center of Gandy.

Many residents along Gandy want the state to kill the project and have solicited help from Gov. Jeb Bush. They argue that either option - the bypass through communities to the south or the elevated highway along the north edge of Gandy - would destroy their neighborhoods and reduce home values.

Russ Sloan, president of the St. Petersburg Area Chamber of Commerce, urged residents to consider the expressway authority's bridge plan but was booed by the audience, most of whom live near Gandy.

Full Text:

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After years of study and review, a decision on whether to build the Gandy Connector may come down to money.

State Sen. Jim Sebesta said Monday that the state can't afford to build a high-speed link between the Lee Roy Selmon Crosstown Expressway and the Gandy Bridge and instead should improve the existing Gandy Boulevard.

Gandy homeowners and business people cheered his plan but wondered if it would happen. Several options remain on the table, including a new one from the Tampa-Hillsborough County Expressway Authority that involves building a bridge down the center of Gandy.

"I would say it's a slight victory," said David Gutcher, president of the Gandy Civic Association, after the meeting at Robinson High School. "But it's not over."

Sebesta, R-St. Petersburg, said fallout from Sept. 11 and a weak economy will force the state to reconsider several transportation projects, including the Gandy Connector. Recent figures show that Florida stands to lose about \$750-million in

federal road money over the next few years, he said.

"If everyone in this room agreed on one of the proposals, we wouldn't do it anyway," he told the audience of about 175 people, who burst into applause.

Still, he said, doing nothing along Gandy is not an option.

Sebesta's plan calls for improving the intersections at Westshore Boulevard, Manhattan Avenue and Dale Mabry Highway, synchronizing the traffic lights and closing off redundant business entrances. He also wants to add a landscaped median that would limit left turns.

The enhancements would cost \$10-million to \$20-million, less than one-tenth of the proposed bypass or elevated highway. They would ease traffic flow between Hillsborough and Pinellas counties without affecting homes and businesses.

"It's taking the existing Gandy and merely improving it," he said. "It's not enlarging it."

Ken Hartmann, the Florida Department of Transportation secretary in charge of the Tampa Bay region, said Sebesta's plan seemed workable but would not solve the area's long-term traffic needs.

"At some point we're going to have to face the reality that the traffic isn't going to go away," he said.

Many residents along Gandy want the state to kill the project and have solicited help from Gov. Jeb Bush. They argue that either option - the bypass through communities to the south or the elevated highway along the north edge of Gandy - would destroy their neighborhoods and reduce home values.

Pinellas County officials say the high-speed road is needed to improve access between the counties and to help evacuate people during hurricanes.

Russ Sloan, president of the St. Petersburg Area Chamber of Commerce, urged residents to consider the expressway authority's bridge plan but was booed by the audience, most of whom live near Gandy.

"I am speaking for a lot of people. This is a road of regional importance," he said.

"I guarantee that growth in 20, 50, 75 years will absolutely mandate that something be done."

Sebesta, who chairs the Senate Transportation Committee, he planned to meet with Pinellas and Hillsborough transportation officials to present his ideas and gauge support. Next spring, he will look for state funding in the Legislature.

Ellen Nimon, who lives in the Regency Cove mobile home park north of Gandy, hopes it happens soon.

"We need Gandy fixed up, but we don't need to have our chains pulled anymore," she said. "We've waited long enough."

Sebesta's plan comes about six weeks after the Hillsborough County Commission voted to oppose the state's options for the Gandy Connector. Commissioners Pat Frank, Jan Platt and Jim Norman attended Monday night's meeting.

The state has said it plans to pick an option in December and reach a final decision by April. Hartmann said that might change because of the new information.

Last week, Pat McCue, who leads the expressway authority, said he needed about 60 days to study and assess his bridge plan, estimated at \$50-million to \$60-million. It would be similar to the bridge the authority is building along the Crosstown between Brandon and downtown Tampa.