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Gandy plans on hold, for now  
County officials decide there is too much opposition and not enough money to  
connect the Crosstown

Expressway with the Gandy Bridge.  
By SUSAN THURSTON, Times Staff Writer

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TAMPA -- Hillsborough transportation officials voted Tuesday to kill the state's  
two proposals for a

Gandy Connector, citing budget shortfalls and neighborhood opposition.

But the Metropolitan Planning Organization left the door open for other options,  
including an elevated

road down the middle of Gandy Boulevard that would link the Gandy Bridge and  
Lee Roy Selmon

Crosstown Expressway.

"Given the current financial situation, it's probably unwise to continue to look at  
proposals that we can't

afford," said Ken Hartmann, secretary of the Florida Department of  
Transportation district that covers

Hillsborough and Pinellas counties.

The state was studying two proposals for the connector: a four-lane elevated  
highway along the north

side of Gandy and a four-lane bypass to the south. DOT officials said the link is  
needed to ease

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commutes between the two counties and to give Pinellas residents another hurricane evacuation route.

The project's cost was estimated at between \$250-million and \$300-million, which the state can't afford,

Hartmann said. Because of the sluggish economy, Florida stands to lose about \$750-million in federal

transportation dollars over the next five years.

"We're facing a harsh financial reality," Hartmann said.

Residents who opposed the state's two proposals cheered the MPO's unanimous vote. They have

argued for years that a connector would disrupt neighborhoods and destroy businesses.

"Finally, the politicians and bureaucrats have listened to the people they represent," said Bob Hart, who

represents the Gandy Civic Association.

"I feel really good," said Ellen Nimon, who lives in the Regency Cove mobile home park north of

Gandy. "This will help our communities greatly."

While axing the connector plans, transportation leaders reiterated their support for sprucing up Gandy,

a busy commercial thoroughfare with frequent stop lights.

State Sen. Jim Sebesta, R-St. Petersburg, has proposed adding turn lanes, lighting and landscaped

medians. He also wants to bury utility lines and eliminate multiple entrances to businesses.

Sebesta said Tuesday that he plans to go to the Legislature next year to seek funding, which he

estimates at \$20-million.

"It's a slam-dunk, piece of cake," he said.

Some of the money set aside for the connector may go toward the improvements, state officials said.

DOT budgeted \$17.8-million for Gandy this fiscal year.

The state also may have money left over from its \$1.4-million planning and engineering study, which

was about two-thirds done before the MPO voted Tuesday to end it.

But there is at least one other option for a connector still under consideration.

Pat McCue, executive director of the Tampa-Hillsborough County Expressway Authority, told the MPO

he is evaluating a two-lane elevated road down the center of Gandy between the Gandy Bridge and the

Crosstown. McCue, whose agency runs the Crosstown, introduced the idea a few months ago but

hasn't discussed details with residents.

"I'm absolutely confident we could do it," he said. "I can assure you it's the best solution."

It would be similar to the bridge the authority is building along the Crosstown between Brandon and

downtown Tampa.

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McCue said he will know in the next several months whether the authority can finance the project,

which could cost up to \$100-million. The best-case scenario for funding is next summer, he said. The

worse case: 2010.

Residents have opposed McCue's plan, saying an elevated road down Gandy would be ugly and

noisy. They want a meeting with the authority to go over specifics before the financing is worked out.

They vow to regroup, if necessary.

"I'm very happy in the short-term, but we have a difficult adversary who has money and who has focus,"

said Val Marz, who lives in Regency Cove.

Russ Sloan, head of the St. Petersburg Area Chamber of Commerce, said he supports making

improvements to Gandy. But he said the Expressway Authority's plan might be the most affordable and

doable in the long term.

"This is a road of regional importance," he said.