

Gandy needs a workable plan Series: EDITORIALS
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Abstract:

Still, it was easy for state and local officials to retreat from two flawed roadway plans. The goal was to cut the commute time between the bridge and downtown Tampa by linking the Gandy with the Lee Roy Selmon Crosstown Expressway. One plan called for a bypass to run through a residential neighborhood south of [Gandy]. The other option was building an expressway north, also through a congested area. These roads would cost several hundred million dollars and would have taken decades to build. This was the real problem - time and money, for neither was a certainty. In the meanwhile the traffic on Gandy would have grown, Pinellas would have lacked additional capacity for evacuations and the planning and political obstacles to build would have gotten even worse.

Full Text:

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The recent decision by area planners to cancel an ambitious expressway for Gandy Boulevard was disappointing, regardless of its practical outcome. There is nothing more important in transportation planning than long-range thinking, and if any road needed that, and now, it's the Gandy, one of three corridors that connects 2-million people in Tampa Bay.

Still, it was easy for state and local officials to retreat from two flawed roadway plans. The goal was to cut the commute time between the bridge and downtown Tampa by linking the Gandy with the Lee Roy Selmon Crosstown Expressway. One plan called for a bypass to run through a residential neighborhood south of Gandy. The other option was building an expressway north, also through a congested area. These roads would cost several hundred million dollars and would have taken decades to build. This was the real problem - time and money, for neither was a certainty. In the meanwhile the traffic on Gandy would have grown, Pinellas would have lacked

additional capacity for evacuations and the planning and political obstacles to build would have gotten even worse.

An elevated, multilane corridor down Gandy built within five or 10 years would have been one solution.

Aside from the need to reduce congestion along Gandy, and to speed traffic times between south

Tampa and St. Petersburg, there is an urgent need for better evacuation routes from south Pinellas

County. A two-lane eastbound expressway with direct access to the Selmon would help move traffic

from Pinellas to I-75 and the interior of the state should a hurricane threaten the coast.

The good news is that a connector might, and should, be built. The Tampa-Hillsborough County

Expressway Authority, the people who run the Selmon, are considering whether to build an express

link from the Gandy to the Selmon, one-lane each way. The 1.5-mile road would rise above Gandy,

have room for emergency lanes and give through-traffic quicker access to downtown Tampa and I-75.

Best of all, the work could begin in just a few years, cost a third of what the other plans cost and have

less of an impact on nearby homes and businesses.

This plan is a scaled-down version of the elevated highway, and though smaller in size, at least the

effort has available funding now and the potential for strong political support. It addresses the same

need for relieving traffic on Gandy and providing faster travel between Pinellas and Hillsborough.

The \$20-million now planned for street-level improvements could have a measurable effect.

Redesigning turn lanes, additional traffic lights, and more efficient use of the public right-of-way all

would improve the traffic flow. In emergencies, authorities could route both express links in the

eastbound direction, giving them up to four lanes of traffic (with the emergency lanes) to absorb a

surge from Pinellas.

The trick is ensuring that the street-level improvements and the express link to Gandy both

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materialize in the next few years. One without the other is not progress. These two plans are really not forward-thinking at all, but catchup improvements needed for years. The new Gandy designs should be flexible enough to accommodate future transportation plans. Local officials in Hillsborough and Pinellas counties also need to collaborate better on a long-term vision for the intercoastal corridor. As the St. Petersburg Chamber's Russ Sloan said: "This is a road of regional importance."