

Word of the commission's decision to petition the governor spread quickly across the bay. Several Pinellas commissioners blasted the action, saying the area needs a bigger road to ease commutes and to give coastal residents another evacuation route.

Brian Smith, director of Pinellas County's Metropolitan Planning Organization, said his group has tried to stay out of the debate and let Hillsborough County decide the best route.

He remains hopeful that Bush will consult Tampa officials and Hillsborough County's Metropolitan Planning Organization before taking a position. Gandy is a state road but runs through Tampa. "We want to know what other people in the area think about it," he said. "We were hoping everyone would be at the table together."

Hillsborough's MPO has not discussed the Gandy connector in detail since last year, when it included the project in its 2025 long-range transportation plan, said Joe Zambito, senior planning manager.

Back then, the project was in its early stages, and the exact alignment was unknown, he said. The MPO set aside future funding for land and construction, but that's not final. He expects the MPO to bring up the issue at its next meeting on Sept. 3.

State transportation officials in the district covering Hillsborough and Pinellas counties said they had no information about Hillsborough's action and would not comment.

The state has said it will pick an option in December, after the project development and environmental study is complete. Hillsborough commissioners said they want an answer by the end of September, before elections bring in new politicians who might not understand the issue.

Project manager Gabor Farkasfalvy said the timing of the decision has nothing to do with politics. The state is still studying the possible environmental impact and must submit the findings to the Federal Highway Administration for review.

"If we had to, we could make a decision today, but it would not be a completely documented one," he said.

Final word will come from Tallahassee. Regardless of the outcome, Farkasfalvy said, Gandy needs to be improved. Estimates show that traffic on Gandy will increase from an average of 40,000 vehicles a day to about 65,000 by 2025.

Emergency officials in Pinellas County aren't holding their breath. Nor do they have to. Motorists can use Gandy as an evacuation route, with or without the direct link to the crosstown expressway.

It just takes longer.

"The whole Gandy corridor has been up in the air for many years," said David Bilodeau, Pinellas County's director of emergency management. "I'm not counting on it at all."

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