

Oct 11, 2002

Ybor Bypass Edges Toward Fast Lane
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TAMPA - City and county transportation officials want to fast-track a road project that will connect the Port of Tampa to Interstate 4 to keep trucks from traveling through Ybor City. The Tampa-Hillsborough Expressway Authority plans to build a mile- long elevated highway connecting I-4 with the Lee Roy Selmon Expressway along 31st Street. The \$130 million project isn't funded, but officials want to start construction within two years.

Perry Dawn Brown, spokeswoman for the expressway authority, said the group has moved the Crosstown Connector ``to the top of our agenda."

Port officials are working with the expressway authority and the Florida Department of Transportation to help secure funding ahead of the 2010 schedule.

``The port will be one of the main beneficiaries," said John Thorington, government liaison for the Tampa Port Authority.

Most truck traffic to and from the port travels through the heart of historic Ybor City, on 21st and 22nd streets, to connect with I-4.

In 2001, a truck slammed into the Columbia Restaurant on its way to the port. The truck knocked out five columns and barely missed the ceramic tiles that decorate the restaurant's facade. No one was seriously injured.

``It felt like an earthquake," said Casey Gonzmart, chairman of the 98-year-old restaurant. ``But it doesn't take a direct hit to cause damage to these old buildings."

Port officials estimate they have 11,000 truck movements a day.

``This connector will take 80 percent of that truck traffic out of Ybor City," said Vince Pardo, president of the Ybor City Development Corp.

This first phase of the project would serve the I-4 lanes east of the connector. Trucks traveling Interstate 75 could use the I-4 connector to access the port.

``There has been discussion about banning all truck traffic from 21st and 22nd streets and diverting it to Adamo Drive," Pardo said. ``But none of that has been decided."

Many Ybor residents and business owners say truck traffic has hindered redevelopment of East Ybor. Every year they lobby state legislators for funding for the connector road.

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``It's like an invisible barrier," Gonzmart said. ``If they can move this project up, it would be the most fabulous news I've heard in years."

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This story can be found at: <http://www.tampatrib.com/FloridaMetro/MGARS39G57D.html>