

Money Issue Brings Gandy Connector Saga To End - For Now

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GANDY - Gandy residents walked away from a Monday night meeting with state Sen. Jim Sebesta feeling as though they scored a big victory in the Gandy Connector debate. But by the end of the week some were wondering whether the victory was hollow.

At the forum, Sebesta told residents that neither an overpass nor a bypass would be built.

``And the reason is, there's no money for this," Sebesta said, to the applause of residents in attendance. He cited a \$750 million shortfall in federal transportation funding revealed in the past month. The overpass would cost \$310.6 million, and the bypass would cost \$277.3 million.

But there was never any immediate funding for the Gandy Connector in the first place. It was on the state Department of Transportation's schedule for 2016 to 2025, with construction likely to begin toward the end of those years.

And that's where it remains today.

``Looking at our funding, we don't have that date moving out," said DOT spokeswoman Marian Scorza. ``That time frame has not changed as of yet."

She said it was too early to tell whether the shortfall would push back the project.

Residents repeatedly have asked the DOT to take steps to smooth traffic flow on Gandy, such as synchronizing traffic lights and limiting curb cuts. A plan unveiled Monday by Sebesta, R-St. Petersburg, did just that. Sebesta also called for right-turn lanes, landscaping and traffic signals on poles alongside the road.

Some residents got the feeling it was only public pressure, not a desire to save homes, that finally brought Sebesta to the table. And what residents didn't get Monday was the pledge from the DOT they'd sought all along: that neither the

bypass nor the overpass will be built.

``It's a step sideways," said David Gutcher, Gandy Civic Association president.

``There is no way for this community to flourish until that answer is met. We're always going to have that what-if hanging over our heads."

Authority Expresses Hope

Meanwhile, Tampa-Hillsborough County Expressway Authority executive director Pat McCue plans to develop a solution for Gandy. The overpass and bypass would displace homes and businesses. That's why the expressway authority entered the fray, claiming it could improve traffic flow without damaging neighborhoods.

``We still have the problem of the separation of local and regional traffic. What DOT gave was pretty much an interim plan," said PerryDawn Brown, expressway authority spokeswoman. ``Something has to be done. ... The communities are still waiting around as to what is happening to regional traffic."

Monday, McCue suggested an elevated highway down the middle of Gandy might be the answer to separating local and regional traffic. The expressway authority has said its overpass could be started soon and built within seven years. That prospect at first pleased residents eager for closure.

Some who attended Monday's meeting thought the idea was a logical compromise, better than the DOT's overpass or bypass. But overall, McCue's proposal was greeted by boos and grunts of distaste from the audience.

But the expressway authority is confident it can produce a plan that will please residents.

``Yes, there were some that did not like the idea," Brown said. ``A lot of people sit there and think that all bridges have to be ugly ... They're afraid that, 'Here is my home, I'm going to have to see this big, ugly bridge.' But that's not the case."

Brown said Sebesta's forum wasn't the best place for the authority to present its plan, primarily because the plan doesn't exist yet.

``We really wanted 60 days, but we didn't get that. We had six days," Brown said, referring to McCue's pledge at the Hillsborough Metropolitan Planning Organization meeting Oct. 1 to draw up a Gandy plan in two months' time.

Instead of laying out a detailed plan Monday, McCue could only point to an elevated, reversible highway the expressway authority will erect to link Brandon and downtown. He said a two-lane, two-way version of the highway could be used to speed regional traffic between Dale Mabry Highway and Gandy Bridge.

``We'll consider anything ... but if we're talking about an overpass, it's not going to fly," said Bob Hart, executive vice president of the Gandy Civic Association, citing air and noise pollution an elevated expressway might cause. ``I'm opposed to something that's some concrete monster that people are going to have to look at day in and day out."

Guernsey Estates residents oppose any kind of overpass for similar reasons, said Anne O'Hara.

And residents at Regency Cove, a mobile home community on the north side of Gandy, plan to launch a letter-writing campaign opposing any expressway authority plans, said Ellen Nimon, president of Regency's board of directors.

``Everybody was pleased with the meeting, but they still said, 'We don't want no elevated expressway,'" Nimon said. ``Because it's going to make a slum out of the area. It might be beautiful for a year." But then it would begin to look like ``crap," she predicted.

Still In Limbo

Residents are eager for closure on the Gandy issue so they can take their lives off hold.

``We've always felt that, even though you build 30 years from now, at least you know what's going to happen," said Neil Cosentino, local activist and president of Bay World Public Trust Inc., an eight-person think tank. ``Whatever happens, it's just not improving Gandy, it's coming up with the final plan as soon as possible."

Cosentino's proposal - a tunnel - is the only plan that would separate local and

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regional traffic and leave homeowners' views unobstructed. But it has been discarded as too costly. Cosentino says the DOT's \$500 million estimate is inflated and that a tunnel from near the end of the Lee Roy Selmon Expressway to near Gandy bridge is a solution to Gandy's traffic problem.

``If the community doesn't want an elevated - and all of us agree something needs to be done - the only alternative is to go under," Cosentino said. ``You wouldn't see it; you wouldn't hear it."

But the expressway authority still plans to hammer out a proposal for an elevated road.

Brown said the authority will seek the input of neighborhood groups while designing its plan, ``instead of just coming up and saying, `here's an idea - like it?'."

She said she understands some neighbors' hesitation to embrace the authority's plan.

``Everybody's very afraid of losing property values. And I don't think what we propose is going to affect anybody's property," Brown said. ``If anything, I really think that's going to add to the aesthetic improvement of the area."

But Nimon isn't so sure about the expressway authority's promises. And she's convinced neighbors have not heard the last from DOT about the overpass and bypass plans.

``I think what they're going to do is, perhaps, drop it for the time being," Nimon said. ``They'll be back. They'll be back sometime."

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