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Gandy Traffic Solution Offered
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TAMPA - The Tampa-Hillsborough County Expressway Authority entered a controversial debate Tuesday when its executive director offered to draw up a plan to improve traffic flow on Gandy Boulevard and leave existing neighborhoods and businesses intact.

Pat McCue acknowledged to the Metropolitan Planning Organization that he might be ``stepping into the lion's den." But McCue expressed concern over the ``polarization" between the communities near Gandy and the Florida Department of Transportation. He said the expressway authority had hoped DOT and the neighbors could reach a compromise.

``I strongly believe that there are lots of ways to solve problems," McCue said. ``The only interest we would have in being involved is if we can reconcile the differences between the two sides."

He said he is ``not at all convinced" the only choices are doing nothing on Gandy, an option favored by nearby residents, or doing something that would destroy neighborhoods.

DOT District 7 planners have proposed building either an elevated expressway north of Gandy, at \$310.6 million, or a bypass to the south, at \$277.3 million. Either would destroy homes and businesses.

McCue offered no guarantees to the Metropolitan Planning Organization, saying, ``If we can help, fine. If we can't, at least we tried."

But McCue's tone was confident as he talked with community members outside the MPO's conference room, saying his ideas would be made public within 60 days, after engineers draw up plans and present them to DOT. He said he would like the project to be funded by DOT and the expressway authority. He also said he wants construction to start soon and be finished in seven years.

``Whatever we do will be beautiful, and it's going to be unique," McCue said.

Offer Called A Breakthrough

McCue said the expressway authority has a vested interest in the project as whatever is built along Gandy will feed directly onto the Lee Roy Selmon Expressway. Authority spokeswoman Perry Dawn Brown said the plan will ``definitely not be a toll facility."

More than 20 residents from the Gandy area attended Tuesday's meeting. Some remarked that McCue's words sounded similar to promises by state Sen. Jim Sebesta, R-St. Petersburg, that he would unveil a compromise plan soon.

McCue called the senator a friend and said, ``I'm totally confident Senator Sebesta will support it. I'm also confident [DOT District 7 Secretary] Ken Hartmann will do that."

McCue said he devised a compromise some time ago but did not come forward because he feared doing so would damage the authority's relationship with DOT. He said Hartmann asked him for assistance two weeks ago.

Hillsborough County Commissioner Jan Platt called McCue's offer a breakthrough.

Skeptics Bend

Before McCue spoke, several Gandy area residents pleaded with the MPO to kill the Gandy connector once and for all. They said DOT's projected 2025 traffic flow along Gandy Boulevard, some 59,000 cars per day, did not merit destroying neighborhoods and businesses.

``We have people out there who are trying to sell homes. They are living in limbo," said Ellen Nimon of Homes of Regency Cove, on the north side of Gandy Boulevard. ``Please give us a no-build. We need it to get on with our lives."

Gandy Civic Association Executive Vice President Bob Hart, representing homes south of Gandy, told MPO organization members that how they handle Gandy will affect their legacies.

``Will you be proud to tell your grandchildren, for example, that you helped save

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a thriving south Tampa community, or will you keep it to yourself that you helped lay waste to an entire community?" Hart said.

Reporter Tim Bugansky can be reached at (813) 259-7153.

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