

Oct 5, 2002

Another Gandy Solution?

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GANDY - An unexpected twist has residents north and south of Gandy Boulevard talking and hoping. But most of all they're doing what they say they've already done too much: waiting. The future of their homes and businesses may depend on a plan to be developed by the Tampa-Hillsborough County Expressway Authority. Pat McCue, the authority's executive director, says he will propose a compromise Gandy Connector project that will both speed traffic and spare neighborhoods.

On Monday, residents may hear more from transportation officials about new proposals at a public forum at 5:30 p.m. at Robinson High School.

But until they see anything on paper, Gandy residents aren't holding their breath. They say they've already waited too long for the governor's office and the Florida Department of Transportation to listen to their demands.

``Up to this point, they [DOT] really haven't been listening to anybody. They've been doing whatever they really feel like doing," said David Gutcher, president of the Gandy Civic Association.

``There's always reason for hope," Gutcher said. But, he added, ``Until they present us with another option, we have to stay where we are, which is a no-build. As soon as they say something, we'll talk about it."

Residents north and south of Gandy have forged a no-build coalition opposing the DOT's two proposed options to improve traffic flow along Gandy between Dale Mabry Highway and Gandy Bridge: a bypass to the south or an elevated expressway to the north, both of which would displace homes and businesses.

Gandy residents applauded McCue's suggestion that construction on his proposal be started soon and be finished in seven years. The Gandy Connector is on the Metropolitan Planning Organization's long range plan for 2016-2025.

McCue did not reveal specifics about his plans. But some residents said that maybe, at long last, transportation officials might be taking their futures into account.

``If they're finally planning on listening to the people, then there's hope," said Bob Hart, executive vice president of the Gandy Civic Association.

Some residents worried that the introduction of a new alternative might prolong the sense of unease they feel regarding their futures. The DOT plans to announce its decision in January, but residents had called for a final decision to be made before the November elections.

Ellen Nimon, of Homes of Regency Cove, said her community already lost \$70,000 when two potential buyers withdrew their offers to purchase lots along Gandy Boulevard after they learned an expressway might one day loom over their backyards.

McCue said he needs 60 days for engineers to draw up specific plans and to run those plans by DOT officials. But McCue reassured neighbors. He said that if he can draft an acceptable plan and begin work in six months, ``I don't frankly care what their schedule is."

DOT officials said they would entertain any new suggestions made by the expressway authority.

Expressway authority spokeswoman PerryDawn Brown said there are many options for what the agency's design might look like. It could connect to the Lee Roy Selmon Expressway, a toll road.

``Our purpose is to separate local traffic from regional traffic," Brown said. ``We're not going to take Gandy [Boulevard] and turn it into a toll facility so that a neighbor will have to pay to see another neighbor."

Residents on and around Gandy said they are hoping for concrete and immediate solutions so they can stop waiting - and get on with their lives.

``We don't want any more smoke and mirrors," Hart said.

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This story can be found at: <http://tampatrib.com/News/MGAO2YSRW6D.html>