

Nov 21, 2002

Gandy Groups Dig Out Dismissed Tunnel Option

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GANDY - Neighborhood groups may support a tunnel in a last-ditch effort to provide an invisible

solution to Gandy Boulevard transportation problems. But Florida Department of Transportation officials

say a tunnel is out of the question.

Some residents think the DOT is displaying bureaucratic tunnel vision by not considering the ``cut and

cover" option to route regional traffic underneath Gandy Boulevard while keeping local traffic on top.

But DOT officials say the tunnel was dismissed several years ago for a number of valid reasons.

Partly responsible for the recent resurgence in tunnel talk is Al Steenson, a plain-spoken retired

roadbuilder and president-elect of the Gandy Civic Association. Steenson hopes to turn his group on to

the idea and to align other neighborhood groups in support of the tunnel, too.

``I think that this is the only logical solution at this point," Steenson said. ``It doesn't destroy the

community."

Gandy-area residents have staunchly opposed DOT's options for improving traffic flow along Gandy

Boulevard between Dale Mabry Highway and the Gandy Bridge: a bypass to the

south of Gandy or an

overpass along the boulevard's north side. Both would displace homes and businesses.

The Tampa-Hillsborough County Expressway Authority initially piqued residents' interest when its

executive director, Pat McCue, said Oct. 1 that within 60 days he would develop an alternative to DOT's

two proposals. But most residents now say they're not interested in anything the expressway authority

might propose. Officials have said the proposal would include some kind of two-lane elevated road

down the middle of Gandy.

Down the middle, to the north, to the south - all are unacceptable, community members say. But they

also say they're sure something will be built eventually.

DOT: Tunnel Too Costly

The tunnel's biggest proponent has been Neil Cosentino, a Davis Islands resident, retired Air Force

pilot, outspoken community activist and Tampa mayoral candidate.

``Government doesn't take chances," Cosentino said. ``They have a lot more experience with

bulldozing people's homes. They can do that in a heartbeat. ... But to build an underpass, they don't

want to have any part of it."

DOT officials don't deny that a tunnel is possible.

``We could build it," said Gabor Farkasfalvy, project manager for DOT District 7.

``Given enough

money, you can pretty much build anything you want to. We just didn't think it was a viable solution. ... It

cost too much."

The DOT estimates the tunnel's price tag at \$500 million, a figure Cosentino and Steenson say is about

\$200 million more than necessary. Also, Farkasfalvy said, the tunnel proposal ``causes too much

disruption during construction."

Farkasfalvy said a tunnel could not be built within the existing 100 feet of right-of-way on Gandy. At least

40 extra feet would have to be purchased, adding to the project's cost. A narrower two-lane version

could be built, he said, but that would not meet future traffic needs.

Also, Farkasfalvy said, ``South Tampa is a low-lying area and is susceptible to flood damage" during

rainstorms and the tidal surges that accompany hurricanes. ``During the storm surge, no pumps

reasonably sized could handle the amount of water that would rush into this tunnel."

Gandy is intended to be an emergency evacuation route for Pinellas County. Potential emergencies,

Farkasfalvy said, include but are not limited to hurricanes.

``With the aftermath of 9/11, you have all kinds of emergencies [to worry about],'' Farkasfalvy said. ``You

don't really want to evacuate people underground when there's all kinds of nasty things that can

happen.''

Cosentino Says It's Doable

But where the DOT sees fatal flaws, Cosentino sees hope.

He estimates the tunnel could be constructed for about \$300 million, a figure that is in the

neighborhood of the DOT's projected costs for the overpass, \$310.6 million, and bypass, \$277.3 million.

He says it can be built within the current right of way using creative construction techniques. He said a

``big duct'' beneath could collect stormwater, solving the flooding problem, ``I would say within one

mile either way.''

Cosentino frequently points to a New Jersey tunnel project, the Atlantic City-Brigantine Connector, as

an example that a Gandy underpass is possible. The 2,000-foot underground portion of the Brigantine

project was built for \$65 million. Cosentino uses that figure as evidence that a Gandy tunnel - which the

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DOT says could either be 4,500 feet or 8,750 feet - should be much cheaper than \$500 million.

But in a memorandum dated Aug. 13, the DOT says construction of the Brigantine tunnel was

``relatively straightforward.'' It cites several differences between the Brigantine project and a hypothetical

Gandy tunnel. The Gandy tunnel would be wider and taller. It would have to support four lanes of traffic,

while ``the roof of the Brigantine Tunnel is built to support a linear park.'

Cosentino wonders why the memorandum was even written, if the DOT says a tunnel is not an option.

``Who keeps designing something that's worthless?'' he said. ``What's this, the Twilight Zone? Are we

in the Mad Hatter tea party?''

The DOT dismissed the tunnel option when the Hillsborough County Metropolitan Planning

Organization directed it to proceed with plans for the current two Gandy options, Farkasfalvy said. The

August memorandum doesn't present entirely new designs, he said, just analysis and updated costs.

Farkasfalvy said Cosentino is a big reason the memorandum was drawn up.

``We did it primarily at his request,'' Farkasfalvy said. ``He made it an issue. We decided that in order to

dispose of the issue ... we just wanted to document the fact that it was not a viable alternative. And as far

as the DOT is concerned today, it's not a viable alternative."

Project 'In A Holding Pattern'

The DOT is still studying a proposal by state Sen. Jim Sebesta, R-St. Petersburg, for surface

improvements to Gandy Boulevard. Sebesta's proposals included synchronizing traffic signals and

adding right-turn lanes.

``We are in the process of determining if those are workable," Farkasfalvy said.

``You've got to have

some bang for your buck. You don't want to go out and spend money with no benefit."

DOT officials had said they would announce their final recommendation for the Gandy project by

January. But with Sebesta's proposals and a plan from the expressway authority in the works,

Farkasfalvy said, ``We're kind of in a holding pattern to wait and see what comes out of those

alternatives."

Cosentino is undaunted.

``We have a valid solution that's never gotten any support from anyone. I'm very positive. I think we're

going to win," he said. ``For God's sakes, we're not putting a space station in orbit."

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