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Gandy Future Worries Residents
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TAMPA - Thursday was the semiannual Trash and Treasure rummage sale at Regency Cove.

From behind a table in the Friendship Hall, Dee Bedore peddled tickets to upcoming events at the

south Tampa mobile home community - the New Year's Eve Dance, the Western Dance and Chili

Supper.

Bedore mused over what residents see as a victory for Gandy Boulevard- area neighborhood groups:

Tuesday's unanimous vote by the Hillsborough County Metropolitan Planning Organization to suspend

work on state proposals for a connector to separate regional and local traffic along Gandy Boulevard

from Dale Mabry Highway to Gandy Bridge.

The organization held the vote at the request of Florida Department of Transportation District 7

Secretary Ken Hartmann, whose office worked on the plans.

``If they come back again, we'll fight them again. We'll fight on until they don't do it anymore, until they

give up," Bedore said. ``We may be old, but we're not dead."

Regency Cove residents feared one DOT proposal, a \$310.6 million overpass along Gandy's north

side. They dreaded noise, pollution and the sight of an elevated roadway looming above their park,

visible from Friendship Hall, the swimming pool, the shuffleboard courts and many of the community's

400 mobile homes.

Neighbors to the south were most worried by the DOT's other option, a \$277.3 million southern bypass.

In August, Regency Cove's Friendship Hall, usually home to activities such as bingo and church

services, became a breeding ground of neighborhood activism. At a meeting there, neighbors north

and south of Gandy joined forces, calling on the DOT to scrap both Gandy Connector ideas.

“Before August when we had our meeting, it was Regency Cove fighting, it was Gandy Civic fighting, it

was Guernsey Estates fighting,” said Ellen Nimon, president of Regency Cove's board of directors.

“And I felt we needed to get together as one and make a decision as one.”

Residents rejoiced last week, certain their letters, e-mails and presence at public meetings had forced

the DOT to drop its Gandy Connector proposals for the foreseeable future.

But another factor contributed to the suspension of DOT's Gandy Project Development and

Environmental study: money - or lack of it.

“Right now that project was unaffordable, and we couldn't get consensus,” said DOT spokeswoman

Marian Scorza, citing a \$750 million shortfall in federal transportation funds over the next five years. She

said it seemed pointless “to spend money and energy and time into a project like that.”

Scorza said the DOT has spent 60 percent to 70 percent of the \$1.4 million budgeted for the study. The

DOT had planned to hold a public hearing this month or in January and recommend designs to the

MPO by April.

“The elevated and the bypass are not in the future of Gandy at the present time,” Scorza said. But, she

added, “I can't say what's going to happen 20 years from now.”

MPO member and Hillsborough County Commissioner Pat Frank said canceling a study as significant

as the Gandy study seemed unprecedented. “That's what makes me think it's the money more than

anything else,” she said.

What's Next On Gandy?

When it voted to suspend the DOT study, the MPO left the door open for long-term solutions. It also

supported a proposal by state Sen. Jim Sebesta, R-St. Petersburg, for improvements to Gandy

Boulevard.

Scorza said the DOT also endorses Sebesta's proposal, which includes synchronized traffic lights and

added right- turn lanes. Scorza said the department would implement this idea within the next five

years.

But few residents or officials said Sebesta's proposal is an end-all solution to Gandy traffic problems.

About 41,000 cars per day travel Gandy now, and the DOT estimates 65,000 cars per day will travel

Gandy by 2025, many using the road as a regional link to Pinellas County. And the MPO left the door

open for other long-term solutions.

All eyes now are on the Tampa-Hillsborough County Expressway Authority, the only entity likely to

construct something on Gandy in the next decade. At Tuesday's MPO meeting, expressway authority

Executive Director Pat McCue said his group still would develop a plan at a cost of less than \$100

million. McCue suggested a two-lane elevated road that would run down the middle of Gandy, and that

would be ``a work of art." The worst-case scenario, he said, is to have the project funded by 2010.

``The absolute best-case scenario would be to do it in conjunction with the [surface] work that DOT is

proposing because then it would be completely coordinating," McCue said. ``The two together will

carry the traffic that DOT has forecast for 20 years."

McCue told the MPO on Tuesday that ``my commitment to you is before you do your long-range plan

update roughly a year from now, I will come back to you and the neighbors and tell you what we can

do, and we'll all decide together how to make that happen."

St. Petersburg Area Chamber of Commerce President Russ Sloan had favored the DOT's southern

bypass option as a more direct link between the downtowns of Tampa and St. Petersburg.

``I think there's the potential for lemonade out of lemons. If we don't have the money to do it," Sloan

said, ``then maybe the lemonade part is the expressway's proposal."

Sloan said he's confident the expressway authority can design an attractive, functional thoroughfare.

``I really think, at this point, that this might be the best compromise," Sloan said. ``What some people

better be cognizant of is if you reject the proposal of the elevated over Gandy, then you may force a

revisit sometime of the southern bypass" or the northern overpass.

``There is absolutely no question that this is a road of regional importance that needs to be tied into the

expressway," Sloan said. ``If that's not done, then we have done a phenomenal

disservice to the future

of transportation in the Tampa Bay area."

Gandy Groups Still Watchful

Gandy-area residents are skeptical about expressway authority plans. What's the difference, they

wonder, between an elevated road to the north of Gandy and one down the middle?

"It's less scary, but we're not happy with it," Nimon said.

Expressway authority officials originally said they would have a design by this month, telling residents

they would seek their input.

"Nobody did, and nobody ever has," said Bob Hart, executive vice president of the Gandy Civic

Association. "We would be anxious to sit with [McCue] and hold those kinds of discussions."

Although DOT's proposals may be out of sight, they are definitely not out of the Gandy groups' minds.

"It's been tabled till they untangle it," Bedore said.

Or, as Hart fears: "All of a sudden, in the year 2003, if they come up and say, 'We made a mistake, we

came up with more money than we thought we had,' FDOT would be right back."

He called the MPO's vote "a victory for the community - at the moment. And that's why I remain

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cautiously optimistic, simply because I've got a distrust of both politicians and bureaucrats."

But Nimon hopes life at Regency Cove, which is supposed to be a place where ``you're on vacation all

the time," will resume a sense of normalcy. Six empty lots sit for sale at the southern edge of the park.

In May, buyers made \$5,000 down payments on two of them. But when the connector controversy

escalated, the buyers balked, and the park refunded their money, losing out on sales worth \$70,000.

``I think they'll sell now," she said. ``I think they'll sell because people won't be afraid of having that

overpass in their back yard."

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This story can be found at:

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