

Gandy Disconnect
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Sides can't agree on the proposed options for a Gandy connector, or even if one should be built.

SOUTH TAMPA - David Gutcher remembers the days when ``south of Gandy" wasn't even considered a part of South Tampa.

``We were treated as the whipping boys of South Tampa," said the president of Gandy Civic Association, who has lived in the area since he was 5.

For the past decade, however, there's been a trend in the opposite direction. The area has been on a redevelopment path. New homes are sold as soon as they are built. Property owners and businesses are happy.

That boom faces a hurdle that resurfaced recently.

On paper for more than a decade, a project called the Gandy Connector has rekindled a controversy over how - and why - to extend the Lee Roy Selmon Expressway to Pinellas County. The Florida Department of Transportation presented two updated options for the half-billion-dollar project at a May 9 public workshop.

There are many maps and memos and much math; no money yet, but a lot of talk on Gandy Boulevard.

To the southern half of South Tampa, Gandy is a blood vessel, the lifeline of the boom. It is the main street. People use it to go to work. It is the southernmost major business district, with shops ranging from mom-and-pop stores to department stores, gas stations and banks.

But Gandy is also a segment of U.S. 92.

Everyone agrees the highway needs to be wide open. But the consensus stops there, and conflict erupts when the question is asked, ``What should be done?"

The DOT answered that question by proposing two four-lane alternatives for the connector, which would extend from Dale Mabry Highway in Hillsborough to east of Fourth Street in Pinellas County.

Two Options

The first option is an elevated expressway, which, according to project manager Gabor Farkasfalvy, would be 2.5 miles long. From the end of the Lee Roy Selmon Expressway, it would go north of and parallel to Gandy Boulevard.

Also called the overpass, it would cost \$310.6 million, according to DOT estimates. Less than half the money would go toward construction while more than one-third of it would be spent for acquisition of 37 businesses and land between Dale Mabry Highway and West Shore Boulevard.

Another alternative is a 3.1-mile bypass south of Gandy. From Gandy Bridge, it would turn south just after Bridge Street, cut through Imperial Yacht Basin, meet the CSX railroad at the intersection of Tyson Avenue and West Shore Boulevard, then follow the railroad, turning north near Lois Avenue and meeting the expressway.

Partially elevated, the loop would relocate 16 homes, 168 apartment units and 18 businesses. Of the \$277.3 million estimated total cost, \$113.7 million, or 42 percent, would be spent for the destruction of those homes and businesses; a little more than one third, \$92.9 million, for the construction of the structure.

The totals also include \$12.6 million for design and engineering and inspection of the overpass, and \$14.8 million for design and engineering and inspection of the bypass. The bypass would move the CSX railroad south and link to West Shore Boulevard by ramps.

The costs for both include \$29.8 million for improving the intersection of Gandy Boulevard and Dale Mabry Highway. With either the overpass or the bypass, the transportation department has committed \$23 million for reconstruction and upgrades to the existing Gandy Boulevard.

Like the improvements on Gandy, West Shore ramps are considered ``deal sweeteners.'' The department offered four alternatives for the bypass loop (whether to move the railroad or not, whether to add West Shore ramps to the bypass or not) at the public workshop where people were asked to comment.

Farkasfalvy said the bypass option that includes ramps and relocating the railroad has received the most backing, and the department will drop the other three options. It will announce the decision in a newsletter in the next two weeks.

The price tag of the connector reaches as much as \$517.7 million when the Pinellas part is added. From the bridge to just east of Fourth Street, that part would cost \$207.1 million, more than 76 percent going toward relocating 12 businesses and 29 single family homes and purchasing the rest of the land.

The department, which has spent millions on studies, so far has money only for the design of the Tampa part. Right-of-way and construction funding has not been identified. Costs could climb because the DOT says construction can begin in 2009 at the earliest. The economic impact would go beyond the number of businesses and homes that would have to move, many agree.

Except for shifting the elevated expressway from directly over Gandy to north of Gandy, this time around there's little new about the project to South Tampa residents, who have been cold to it - if not hostile.

No Benefit To South Tampa

``They both suck," said Bob Hart, one of the opponents of the projects, of the options.

``I don't see any benefit to South Tampa at all," he said. ``On the contrary, I see a gross negligence on the part of the FDOT."

From what could be one of the largest public projects in South Tampa, ``what we gain is a devastated community," said Hart, who has been actively involved in the project on behalf of the Gandy community since 1991.

``They are going down the same path as Harlem in New York, or Watts in California - community destruction."

He said the bypass would devastate the environment and pose a threat to the safety of the area.

The DOT says the bypass would contaminate nearly half as many sites as the overpass, but involve almost the same amount of wetlands. The overpass has the potential to contaminate 17 sites, and impact 12.4 acres of wetlands.

Many people and organizations like the St. Petersburg Chamber of Commerce in Pinellas have supported the project.

Since the Lee Roy Selmon Expressway opened in 1976, there's been an expectation on the Pinellas side of the Bay that the expressway would be extended.

``Gandy is an exceptionally important economic corridor" between the two counties, said Don Crane, who heads Floridians for Better Transportation, a St. Petersburg-based nonprofit organization, which, he said, helps to get funding for major transportation projects.

The group has no position on Gandy, Crane said, but he thinks it's ``long overdue."

``To not have any funding for the next 10 years is incomprehensible," he said.

He said DOT District 7, which oversees Hillsborough, Pinellas and three other neighboring counties, has an annual \$1.8 billion budget for the next five years.

``We are going to have to wait for the cows to come home," he said.

That takes time, as does his drive from Gandy Bridge to the expressway, sometimes up to 12 minutes, Crane said.

On a recent day, however, Hart said he drove the 1.2-mile distance from Bridge Street to Dale Mabry Highway at 4:15 p.m in 2.5 minutes and caught only one light at the intersection of West Shore for 45 seconds.

St. Pete To Tampa In 15 Minutes

If the connector is built, engineers say, a motorist could travel from downtown St. Petersburg to downtown Tampa in 15 minutes.

Hart said that convenience would come at the cost of an established community surrounding Gandy.

``I think Pinellas gave [state Sen. Jim] Sebesta his marching order, and he gave the FDOT its marching order," Hart said.

Sebesta has been one of the leading supporters of the project. He acknowledged that ``it is a very expensive project," but he said it is needed.

Hart said the composition of Sebesta's district determined his position. Sebesta represents Senate District 20, with one quarter of its constituency in South Tampa and the bulk in Pinellas.

An important decision-maker as chairman of the senate Transportation Committee, Sebesta opposed the argument that the project is for Pinellas County.

``Cars don't travel one way," he said.

He believes it is ``irresponsible of the FDOT" to keep the no-build option on the table in public meetings. Sebesta gave the example of U.S. 19 in Pinellas, where a project to improve the road was postponed and costs have reached a half-billion dollars.

Insisting on no-build as an option ``magnifies the cost," he said, if the road eventually is built.

Along with the two road-building options, leaving Gandy as is will remain viable throughout their study, said DOT's Farkasfalvy.

Three Reasons

Since the May 9 meeting, there's been more opposition than overwhelming support for any option.

Farkasfalvy said there are three main objectives of the project.

First, he said, the goal is to improve traffic capacity by adding four new lanes to the existing four lanes to accommodate drivers until 2025.

More than 60,000 vehicles per day are expected to travel the road by 2015, Farkasfalvy said.

``That figure is grossly exaggerated," Hart said.

The predictions are from county planners based on population growth and other factors, Farkasfalvy said.

The second goal of the project, he said, ``which folks in Hillsborough don't want to hear," is that there's a need for an emergency evacuation route for Pinellas County. He acknowledged that it would ``primarily benefit folks in St. Petersburg" since evacuation would flow from west to east.

That argument, too, is far from convincing to those in the Gandy area. Many say that when the wind reaches 40 miles per hour, the bridge is closed, so it would do little as an evacuation route. Hart said during the last two tropical storms the bridge was closed.

Farkasfalvy says any evacuation would be completed before the wind gathers such force.

The project's third goal is to handle regional traffic, separating it from local traffic, and move it as fast as possible.

That does little for Hart and many others.

``It is all designed for people going to Pinellas County to avoid two traffic lights," Hart said. ``It's a straight shot for them all the way to Brandon."

(CHART) ABOUT THE CONNECTOR

Here is the Gandy Connector's journey on paper:

- 1991 - The Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) began the first Project Development and Environment (PD&E) Study.
- 1992 - An alternative public workshop on the project was held.
- 1993 - A public hearing was held, the FDOT decided to build the bypass.
- 1994 - Previous PD&E Study was suspended due to federal regulations that mandated a Major Investment Study (MIS) be undertaken before expending federal dollars for major transportation projects.
- 1996 - Gandy MIS was initiated. Limits were along Gandy Boulevard from U.S. 19 to Dale Mabry Highway.
- 2000 - MIS process completed. Two corridor concepts were advanced for the Hillsborough County portion and one corridor concept for the Pinellas County portion.
- April 2001 - Current Gandy Connector PD&E Study initiated.
- November 2001 - Public open house is held to present a traffic analysis for six-laning Gandy Boulevard in Hillsborough County. That option was discarded.

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-- May 9, 2002 - DOT presents two options again, this time shifting the overpass to the north of Gandy Boulevard.

-- December 2002 DOT plans to make a decision by then and present its choice at a public hearing tentatively scheduled for the first week of the month.

-- Spring 2003 - Design process for the selected option begins.

Source: The Florida Department of Transportation

(CHART) AVE SOMETHING TO SAY?

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Write the Federal Highway Administration or your senators or congressmen.

If DOT chooses the bypass or overpass in December, it will need the approval of the highway administration to begin the design phase. The approval process takes from six weeks to six months.

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You may also contact the representative of your area at the U.S. House of Representatives.

(CHART) (C) GANDY CONNECTOR COSTS

Here is a breakdown of the alternatives and the costs.

(See microfilm for complete chart.)

Tribune graphic; Source: The Florida Department of Transportation
