

Photo by: Tribune photo by BRUCE HOSKING

Neil Cosentino holds a copy of the Regency Cove mobile home park's newsletter in which a tunnel under Gandy Boulevard is suggested.

Divided By Gandy

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Published: Jun 22, 2002

SOUTH TAMPA - Don Franklin and Donia Solosky looked like children on the first day of school. At their first civic association meeting, the couple seemed out of their element, more anxious than excited because of their suddenly uncertain future.

For the past 2 1/2 years, they had driven by a sign on Oklahoma Avenue, paying little attention to its message: the time, date and venue of the Gandy Civic Association's monthly meeting.

Only after they read in the paper that their house could be in the path of a road project did the sign begin to mean something to the couple. They were the first to arrive and last to leave the organization's building at 4207 Oklahoma Ave.

Like four other new members, Franklin and Solosky had come to learn more about a proposed bypass that would cut through their neighborhood south of Gandy Boulevard, and to unite with neighbors to find ways to fight it.

"It will ruin our house," Franklin said, "... the environment, the pollution, the noise. The homeless will gather there."

----- That's how Karen and Charles Hilbert Jr. said they felt about the other option, the elevated expressway, or overpass, when they took the front seats at another meeting on the north side of Gandy Boulevard.

When Karen Hilbert lost her job in Allentown, Pa., last year, the couple decided it was time for retirement. They sold everything and bought a 2- bedroom unit for \$35,000 at Regency Cove mobile home park.

Now their home is in danger.

As upset as Franklin and Solosky - and as determined - Karen Hilbert said, "This is a major

life-changing thing for us."

----- Several blocks and days apart from each other, the topic of both meetings last month was the same: the Gandy Connector, a project by the Florida Department of Transportation to link the Lee Roy Selmon Expressway via the Gandy Bridge to Pinellas County, with either an overpass alongside and north of Gandy, or a bypass south of the roadway.

Franklin said the bypass loop would bring down to ``zilch" the value of the Wallace Circle house he and Solosky bought for \$82,500, now worth \$125,000 after installation of a pool. Theirs is not among the 184 homes that would be relocated but they say the loop would ruin their home's value.

The Hilberts say the overpass likewise would ruin their way of life. The structure would relocate 37 businesses and no homes but would graze the border of the mobile home park, the DOT says.

The project has divided the community surrounding Gandy Boulevard in a way few issues have.

With a cost of hundreds of millions of dollars, either structure would change the life of one of the two couples along with scores of other neighboring families and business owners.

There's more opposition than support for either the bypass or the overpass, but when residents have to make a choice they throw the ball to the other side of the roadway.

``It is the lesser of the two evils," say those in the north and businesses on Gandy when pointing to the bypass, and vice versa.

Everybody says ``not in my back yard," said Bob Hart, executive vice president of the Gandy Civic Association.

Gandy Gives In

The Gandy Civic Association represents the largest and most populous area affected - nearly 7,500 residents, according to the 2000 Census. The area would be most affected if the DOT decides in December to build the bypass. It would destroy 16 homes, 168 multifamily units and 18 businesses, according to state road planners.

The civic group was against the project all along. Led by President David Gutcher and Hart, residents accepted neither choice and tried until last year to convince the DOT to extend Gandy Boulevard to six lanes.

When the DOT decided in November that six-laning will not meet traffic needs in 2025, the civic association acquiesced, saying that it would accept the overpass provided the association has a say over ``how this thing is designed and built."

``They are going to do something," Gutcher said. ``Whatever the FDOT wants to do, it should do it on

Gandy."

Although few and not as vocal, there are still people supporting the no-build option and those, like Hart, who haven't given up on six-laning.

Gutcher told the Franklins and other neighbors that the DOT would probably go with the overpass, but after seeing that the updated total costs were ``so close" a couple of weeks later, he said, ``It's a coin-toss at this point." Then, he guessed:

``I hate to say it, but it's 60 percent bypass and 40 percent overpass."

Ramps: Gandy To Port Tampa

The road project has caused a rift between Gutcher's group and its southern counterpart, the Civic Association of Port Tampa City, representing a 4,000-strong neighborhood removed from the effects of the Gandy Connector.

What the Gandy group views as ``destruction of an established community," Port Tampa favors. That's because the DOT would build ramps to West Shore Boulevard. Port Tampa residents believe the estimated 750 trucks traveling through their community would be diverted from Interbay Boulevard to West Shore, lured by the ramps and the easy access to the bridge and the expressway, said group's president, Jill Buford.

``While this is not `the fix' for all our truck traffic, it is a start to calm the traffic on Interbay," Buford said. ``This is a small step on a very long road."

Her group, one of the best organized and most active civic associations in Tampa, supported the bypass and sent its comment to the DOT.

Hart, of the Gandy Civic Association, said Port Tampa was with Gandy until the DOT officials met them alone and offered to add the ramps to West Shore.

``They are using every tactic to divide the community," Hart said.

Buford said the ramps were certainly one of the things Port Tampa residents considered when making their decision after many meetings, but wasn't the only one.

``We weigh in how our neighbors would feel," she said, ``But our job is to watch for the interest of Port Tampa. Our interest is [to find a solution to] those trucks. Unfortunately, in this case, it puts us at odds with our neighbors."

The third neighborhood south of Gandy, Ballast Point, has not taken up the issue because the project area is far from them, said Gene Wells, vice president of its civic group.

Politicians Wait And See

Wells, who is running for county commission in District 1, has avoided taking a position in favor of either option. That's despite the fact that he said he receives up to six e-mail messages or telephone calls every week regarding the connector.

Hart said incumbent or candidate, every politician in the area must make their position clear.

State Sen. Jim Sebesta, R-St. Petersburg, said he supports the project and will throw his support behind one of the options within 30 days.

``But I don't like the idea of double-decking Gandy," he said, mainly because the overpass would affect the retirees at Regency Cove.

Wells is also co-chair (the other is Gutcher) of a task force at the South Tampa Chamber of Commerce, which takes credit for having the DOT commit itself to spending \$23 million on Gandy Boulevard, adding ramps to West Shore Boulevard, and taking another look at six-laning Gandy last year.

The six-lane option was taken off the table in November because the DOT said it is not worth the cost and would fail to accommodate the 60,000-vehicle-a-day volume the population and job growth are expected to bring in by 2025.

Like Wells, the chamber has taken no position on the bypass-overpass dilemma, even though the fate of 55 businesses is in question.

Gabor Farkasfalvy, project manager at the DOT, made a presentation on June 6 to the chamber's board, which, Wells said, ``may respond later."

The businesses, few of which chamber officials said are members of the organization, are stressed out over the project.

Businesses on the north of Gandy Boulevard are against the overpass.

``That elevated highway is ugly and divisive; it would put me out of business," said Larry Shadday, owner of Woody's Auto Sales at 4601 Gandy Blvd., one of the 37 businesses that would be ``relocated" if the DOT decides to build the overpass.

Businesses on the south side of the boulevard are against the overpass as well, even though it would not relocate them. They fear the construction, appearance of and pollution generated by the structure would disrupt their businesses as well. Some of them, too, supported the six-lane option to the end.

Ken Olipra, owner of Checkers Drive-In restaurant at 4530 Gandy Blvd., said he supports the ``no-build option" and asked the department to improve the boulevard instead.

The merchants support the no- build option, but, they say, if something has to be built it should be the bypass.

As the only alternative to construction, leaving Gandy as is will remain viable throughout the project development and environment study, say DOT officials.

Our Business District

Residents on the north side with businesses.

Ann O'Hara, who lives a block from Gandy, said in addition to gas stations, car dealerships and fast-food restaurants, the elevated expressway would impact nice mom-and-pop restaurants, a bait shop and two banks.

``This is the business district of those who live south of Gandy as well as those of us who live literally underneath the proposed elevated highway," she said.

From Buford to Hart, many agree with her.

So do residents of Regency Cove, who lead the opposition to the overpass. They want other options to be explored; if not, they want DOT to go with the bypass.

There are efforts to unite the community and rally residents behind a less painful option.

Val Marz, a resident at the mobile home park at 4851 Gandy Blvd., said he's all for such a solution.

Tunnel Not So Costly Now

In addition to the six-lane option, still defended by Hart, there's another alternative, said community activist Neil Cosentino, who promotes what he calls ``cut-and-cover," a tunnel under Gandy.

The tunnel was among 17 original build options the DOT studied, said Farkasfalvy. The tunnel was discarded in 1998. It was costly (\$270 million, the DOT estimated then) and not feasible, Farkasfalvy said.

``That's why you don't see many tunnels in Florida," he said.

Neither Cosentino nor Hart is convinced.

Compared to the estimated cost of the proposed bypass (\$277.3 million) and that of the overpass (\$310.6 million), the cost of a tunnel seems cheaper, Cosentino said, especially considering the effect of the bypass and overpass on tax revenues, property values and the overall economy of the area.

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A Davis Islands resident, Cosentino takes credit for saving the Friendship Trail Bridge and believes the tunnel option would end ``this nonsense, this false dilemma," and save the Interbay community from destruction.

Hart said ruling out widening Gandy was based on a faulty computer program, and the option deserves another study and should be back on the table.

The DOT officials say the proposal has been found not feasible in two studies.

What DOT found feasible is a nightmare for area residents like Donia Solosky.

``This is the biggest thing we have going on in our lives, and we'll fight that thing with everything we've got," she said. ``March the street, if we have to."

Determined newcomers like her and seniors at Regency Cove who are ``open to creative solutions" dissolve the frustration of activists like Hart.

``I believe we can beat this again - together," he said.

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