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Eight Teams May Bid on \$2.1-Billion I-4 Makeover

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The Orlando Sentinel

By Dan Tracy, Orlando Sentinel

March 4--Eight teams made of up of some of the largest construction companies in the world have indicated they are interested in partnering with the state to pay for the \$2.1 billion reconstruction of Interstate 4.

Among the possible bidders are Dragados USA, an arm of the huge Spanish conglomerate Grupo ACS, Skanska of Sweden, Fluor, based in Irving, Texas, but with an international office, and Hubbard Construction Co., with its main office in Winter Park.

More than 33 companies are involved in the consortiums, and many of their representatives were among the 1,200 people who showed up Monday at an industry forum put on by the Florida Department of Transportation at the Rosen Centre on International Drive.

The idea was to showcase the financial and technical aspects of what the state calls the "ultimate" I-4 improvements to a 21-mile stretch from Kirkman Road to State Road 434. Officials plan to meet individually this week with the I-4 bidders and pick a winner next spring.

"We're off and running to the project construction start," FDOT Secretary Ananth Prasad said.

The state has put aside about \$1 billion for the work and wants private investors to pay for the rest. The winning consortium would get its money back over 35 years through toll payments. As part of the project, the state plans to build four toll lanes down the middle of I-4, with drivers paying a variable rate -- the slower the traffic, the higher the cost.

Work could begin in 2015 and be complete in 2020, when tolls could bring in \$28 million, a recent report estimated. By 2045, that number could rise to \$225 million, the state said.

Florida typically save up for projects and breaks ground only when it expects to have enough to complete the work. But that approach, Prasad said, could drag out the I-4 makeover for 20 years.

That's why tolls have entered the picture. The state already has used them with an expansion of Interstate 595 at Florida's Turnpike in South Florida. The state picked the Spanish company ACS to put up more than half of the \$1.2 billion cost there.

Florida also used tolls to widen Interstate 95 in South Florida. That work also improved traffic flow in the free lanes because motorists were leaving them to pay the tolls, Prasad said.

The state anticipates a minimum charge of 15 cents a mile, with a high of 53 cents in Orlando.

The proposed I-4 tolls are less than what FDOT charges for its 10-mile stretch of I-95 in South Florida. The fees there range from a low of 25 cents a mile to as much as \$7.10 a mile.

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