

SEMINOLE VOICE ARTICLE

I-4 toll lanes: An expensive reality

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It might not be front-page news, but toll lanes on Interstate 4 are quickly and quietly becoming an expensive reality.

Tallahassee has approved nearly a billion dollars in funding these "Lexus lanes" and needs another billion from private investors.

The new project, estimated to take seven years, includes 56 new bridges, along with many replacement bridges and the reconstruction of 15 major interchanges.

The I-4 project comes on the heels of SunRail, the construction of which has begun and will be paid for by fares and increased property taxes.

The new I-4 construction will undoubtedly create massive congestion for drivers and will only cost taxpayers more money. The estimated cost of a one-way cruise in the private Lexus lane from 434 to downtown will be about \$7.70, while the return trip will cost about \$5.

To most, the fare is lunch and a coffee; for a few, this is spare change. How can legislators now justify this project after investing billions of our dollars into SunRail? SunRail was sold as a way to reduce I-4 traffic, so why in the world would we build new toll lanes on I-4?

Logic dictates that by creating private toll lanes on I-4, drivers who might pay for a SunRail ticket will now have the option to stay in their car, avoid traffic and pay the toll instead, thus only helping to reduce SunRail ridership. I can only assume I-4 toll supporters feel the need to force drivers onto SunRail by making the morning commute as miserable as possible. However, the role of government is to help facilitate solutions to problems — not to change the behavior of people or, in this case, force behavior to fit its master plan.

Also, where did the billion tax dollars come from? Could this money not be better spent in our communities or schools? Or is this money being spent because unemployment for road builders hovers around 20 percent?

Gov. Rick Scott just sent \$2 billion back to Washington for the high-speed rail project due to the costs. Now, magically, there is a billion dollars for a toll road. Thanks, but no thanks — I'm not buying.

Why is this important to residents of east Seminole County? Simple, I live in Altamonte Springs west of I-4 and, like many other residents in my area, I will hardly ever pass over I-4 to ride the

SunRail. Yet I, along with other taxpayers, will be paying for the maintenance and costs of SunRail for many years to come via property taxes.

Accordingly, east Seminole County residents who will either take SunRail or drive on the 417 to get to downtown will now be paying for the I-4 toll road although they may never use it.

There are other options, though. We could, at no cost, make the inside lanes of I-4, during peak traffic hours, a two-riders-or-more carpool lane. I say if legislators want their \$2 billion toll road built, they must first prove that SunRail is going to be financially viable. Until then, stop spending our money.

Tolls on I-4 will not help increase SunRail ridership or decrease I-4 traffic for most of us. These tolls, instead of promoting the SunRail as a viable commuting option, will only create competition that neither we nor SunRail can afford.