

# The Daytona Beach News-Journal

## State studies widening I-4, adding toll lanes into Volusia County

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State transportation officials are working on the "ultimate build-out" of Interstate 4, widening it to 10 lanes with four toll lanes, and studying whether to extend that into Volusia County.

A massive \$2.1 billion overhaul of I-4 through Orlando was presented to potential investors in a public-private partnership last week. The interstate would be widened to 10 lanes, four of which would be tolled, with the whole project completed as soon as 2020.

State Transportation Secretary Ananth Prasad said a similar approach to Interstate 95 in South Florida has resulted in average speeds in all lanes increasing from 20 to 45 mph. "You're going to see that on I-4, too," he said.

While few question the need to relieve congestion between Longwood and the attractions, there is skepticism about the need to continue the widening across Seminole County, over the St. Johns River Bridge and all the way to State Road 472 where Deltona, DeLand and Orange City meet. But Volusia County officials recently agreed to join a \$4.6 million state study to look into it.

Lois Bollenback, interim director of the Volusia Transportation Planning Organization, said state officials "are contemplating that extending into Volusia County as early as 2020."

That date may be "a little aggressive," said Frank O'Dea, director of transportation development for the Florida Department of Transportation's District 5 office. But he acknowledged the interest in studying a widened I-4 with toll lanes into Volusia County.

Either way, the 30,000 to 40,000 Volusia commuters who take I-4 into Seminole and Orange counties every day are going to see big changes in the roadway and they will have more choices to get to work in the next decade.

### **BIG CHANGES AHEAD**

Prasad said I-4 likely will get worse before it gets better, but the state can't afford not to improve the interstate now.

The private-public partnership the state is using for I-4 will follow a model used to add tolled express lanes to I-95 in South Florida that started in 2008. For I-4, the state essentially would pay for about half of the \$2.1 billion price tag. The other half would come from a private investor.

The state hosted more than 1,000 people at meetings last week in Orlando as part of the process of finding a partner. The private investor would not only oversee construction, but also would manage the interstate, including fixing potholes and bigger repairs, for 35 years, Prasad said.

The state estimates construction would start in 2015. By turning the project over to a private company, state officials say the construction time would be cut to between five and six years — a span far shorter than the estimated 26 years to widen the interstate using traditional state funding methods.

The plans for improving I-4 in Orlando are sweeping. In addition to adding express lanes, 15 interchanges would be improved and 137 bridges would be built, replaced or modified.

Prasad guaranteed the project would ease congestion during peak travel periods. He said he is confident because Central Florida's entire transportation network is being upgraded.

The SunRail commuter train line linking DeBary to downtown Orlando is expected to begin rolling in about a year. Eventually, the train is planned to operate between Poinciana in Osceola County and DeLand, while Volusia officials are looking into expanding it all the way to Daytona Beach.

Construction also has begun on sections of the final piece in a beltway around Orlando, allowing Volusia and areas west of Orlando to bypass I-4 through downtown.

Even heading east into Daytona Beach, I-4 currently is being widened from four to six lanes.

## **VOLUSIA RESIDENTS' CONCERNS**

In January, the Volusia Transportation Planning Organization board — a collection of local elected officials who put projects into the funding pipeline — voted in support of a study to examine extending toll lanes both east into Volusia and west to the Polk-Osceola county line. Using federal funds, the state has hired consultant HNTB of Lake Mary to conduct the study, expected to be completed in August 2014.

The issue has brought much discussion, starting with the Citizens Advisory Committee that serves the board.

Committee members questioned the cost of widening I-4 with toll lanes just as Volusia County is set to spend \$88 million over the next 30 years on SunRail, the commuter rail line designed to cut down on I-4 congestion. They also questioned the cost of the tolls on individual motorists.

The tolls haven't been set and would vary, with prices going up during peak traffic. A memorandum prepared for the transportation department estimated it could cost as much as

\$7.72 to head west from State Road 434 in Longwood to downtown Orlando during morning rush hour. But the same trip would cost just \$2.30 at night, after evening rush hour.

"With the price of gas now, and to have to pay a toll on top of that . . . we all had a lot of doubts about that toll-lane addition," said Janet Deyette, a former Deltona city commissioner who serves on the citizens' committee.

Tomm Friend, a New Smyrna Beach resident who at one time commuted to Maitland and avoided I-4 because of the congestion, questioned how the toll lanes are going to ease congestion, and said many of the committee's questions over several months had gone unanswered.

Committee members also questioned the state study's cost and voted against supporting it 10-7.

But the TPO board voted in favor of the study because it would answer a lot of questions and the county was one link in a chain that included Seminole, Orange and Osceola counties, which also have an interest in having the study done. "I felt like we needed to be a partner," said Leigh Matusick, a board member from DeLand.

Matusick herself has doubts about the need for toll lanes into Volusia, particularly with SunRail's arrival. "It was supposed to take cars off I-4. I just question is it counterproductive?"

Volusia County Councilwoman Pat Northey, who represents Southwest Volusia, is among those who refer to the toll lanes as "Lexus lanes," and said she doesn't hear many complaints about congestion along the section of I-4 between Volusia and Longwood.

"The closer you get to Orlando, the more congestion you see," Northey said. "If you're only going (from Volusia) to Sanford or Altamonte Springs, there is usually not a delay."

County Chair Jason Davis acknowledged there are lots of questions about the need for toll lanes and how I-4 congestion will change with SunRail.

"You're asking me to read a crystal ball, which I don't have," Davis said, adding he will wait and see what the study shows.

*Editor's note: The state will set prices and collect tolls and not as initially indicated in the scope of duties of potential private investors.*