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# TRANSPORTATION NATION

## Toll Lanes Touted as Congestion Fix for Central Florida's I-4

By Matthew Peddie | 03/08/2013 – 2:51 pm



Artist's impression of the I-4 Ultimate project through Orlando (Image courtesy of Florida Department of Transportation)

"We love Orlando, we love Mickey Mouse, we love Walt Disney, Universal, the Church Street Facilities, that great mall — Millenia Mall, but dadgum that I-4, that's a headache," Florida Department of Transportation Secretary Ananth Prasad told journalists in Orlando this week.

"We're going to fix that headache."

The Florida DOT is moving ahead with plans for the **I-4 Ultimate project**- a \$2.1 billion dollar fix for I-4. The state's prescription includes adding toll lanes to a 21-mile stretch of the interstate running

through the heart of Orlando. The department aims to begin construction in 2015 and complete it by 2020.

Prasad said four so-called “managed lanes” would be added to the interstate, leaving six lanes toll free. Tolls would be higher during heavy congestion periods and lower when traffic is light.

“We use tolls to only keep a certain number of people in the managed lanes so we can keep them going at 50 miles an hour,” he said. “Say if I-4’s ‘general purpose’ lanes – the toll-free lanes – are congested and you only charge a quarter, everybody’s going to be on it, and now you got another two lanes of gridlock. So what you do is you use tolls as a way to manage capacity coming in to the express lane.”

Prasad conceded there is a downside to building the extra lanes.

“There’s going to be inconvenience- you’re talking about \$2 billion worth of work in a very constrained corridor- albeit a long corridor- getting done over five years. It’s a lot of work.”

However, Prasad said a similar \$1.3 billion expansion project is successfully underway on South Florida’s **I-595**. He said travel times along that stretch of road— roughly 10 miles — have only increased by an average of five minutes because of construction.

The state is putting up about half the \$2.1 billion dollar cost of the I-4 Ultimate project and courting private investment to foot the remainder of the bill. Under a public-private partnership agreement with the state, private firms would also maintain and operate the toll lanes for a fixed length of time.

Prasad said the public private partnership allows Florida to take advantage of low interest rates and construction costs.

“What the state gets is delivering a project 20 years in advance,” he said.

“If we were to do this project on a regular pay-go mechanism, we would be building it for the next 20 or 25 years and chasing congestion like we always do.”

Gregg Logan, a managing director at the real estate advisory firm RCLCO’s Orlando office, says the I-4 upgrade will help the local economy.

“You don’t want businesses that are here already and thinking about expanding saying, ‘Gee, do I want to stay here and deal with this gridlock’- or companies that might be thinking about coming and bringing jobs. We want them to be looking at [Orlando] as a good place to invest because we have our act together.”

And he says Florida has to look for new ways to fund infrastructure – with a combination of local government funding, private investment and user fees- because federal government dollars are limited.

"Like it or not that seems to be a collective decision we've made as a society for that's how we're going to fund infrastructure," says Logan, who adds he's worried the US is falling behind other countries in transportation infrastructure.

"When you look around the world right now and you look at where big rail projects and transit projects are being done, you find that's in China Brazil, the Middle East," says Logan.

"We've sort of forgotten that part of what has made us great and enabled us to have the growing economy we have is that we made these investments in infrastructure. Now we've taken that for granted."

The Florida DOT is promoting I-4's managed toll lanes as one part of a multi-modal transport system that could also include bus rapid transit to complement Central Florida's **SunRail commuter train**. SunRail is slated to begin service in 2014, while private rail companies are also talking about an **Orlando to Miami** service and a **maglev rail** linking Orlando International Airport with the Orange County Convention Center.

Eric Dumbaugh, the director of Florida Atlantic University's School of Urban and Regional Planning, supports the addition of managed lanes to I-4. The challenge for Florida, he says, is to develop viable alternatives to driving.

"Our transit system is inadequate in all of our metropolitan areas: it doesn't take us where we need to go, our development doesn't link up to it as well as it should, so we're trapped in our cars."

But Dumbaugh says he's optimistic about Florida's ability to develop a truly comprehensive transportation system, because a new generation is now demanding alternatives to the car.

"You survey millennials- they don't want to drive," says Dumbaugh, who highlights the efforts of a group of Florida Atlantic University students to set up a **transit themed installation in Miami** this weekend.